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The Collected Short Fiction

The Trains (1951)

On the moors, as early as this, the air no longer clung about her, impeding her movements, absorbing her energies. Now a warm breeze seemed to lift her up and bear her on: the absorption process was reversed; her bloodstream drew impulsion from the zephyrs. Her thoughts raced from her in all directions, unproductive but joyful. She remembered the railway posters. Was this ozone?

Not that she had at all disliked the big industrial city they had just left; unlike Mimi, who had loathed it. Mimi had wanted their walking tour to be each day from one Youth Hostel to another; but that was the one proposal Margaret had successfully resisted. Their itinerary lay in the Pennines, and Margaret had urged the case for sleeping in farm-houses and, on occasion, in conventional hotels. Mimi had suggested that the former were undependable and the latter both dreary and expensive; but suddenly her advocacy of Youth Hostels had filled her with shame, and she had capitulated. 'But hotels look down on hikers,' she had added. Margaret had not until then regarded them as hikers.

Apart from the controversy about the city, all had so far gone fairly well, particularly with the weather, as their progress entered its second week. The city Margaret had found new, interesting, unexpectedly beautiful and romantic: its well-proportioned stone mills and uncountable volcanic chimneys appeared perfectly to consort with the high free mountains always in the background. To Mimi the place was all that she went on holiday to avoid. If you had to have towns, she would choose the blurred amalgam of the Midlands and South, where town does not contrast with country but merges into it, neither town nor country being at any time so distinct as in the North. To Margaret this, to her, new way of life (of which she saw only the very topmost surface), seemed considerably less dreadful than she had expected. Mimi, to whom also it was new, saw it as the existence from which very probably her great-grandfather had fought and climbed, a degradation she was appalled to find still in existence and able to devour her. If there had to be industry, let the facts be swaddled in suburbs. The

Free Trade Hotel (RAC and AA) had found single rooms for them; and Mimi had missed someone to talk to in bed.

They had descended to the town quite suddenly from the wildest moors, as one does in the North. Now equally suddenly it was as if there were no towns, but only small, long-toothed Neanderthals crouched behind rocks waiting to tear the two of them to pieces. Air roared past in incalculable bulk under the lucent sky, deeply blue but traversed by well spaced masses of sharply edged white cloud, like the floats in a Mediterranean pageant. The misty, smoky, reeking air of the city had enchanted Margaret with its perpetually changing atmospheric effects, a meteorological drama unavailable in any other environment; but up here the air was certainly like itself. The path was hard to find across the heather, the only landmarks being contours and neither of them expert with a map; but they advanced in happy silence, all barriers between them blown down, even Margaret's heavy rucksack far from her mind. (Mimi took her own even heavier rucksack for granted at all times.)

'Surely that's a train?' said Margaret, when they had walked for two or three hours.

'Oh God,' said Mimi, the escapist.

'The point is it'll give us our bearing.' The vague rumbling was now lost in the noisy wind. 'Let's look.'

Mimi unstrapped the back pocket on Margaret's rucksack and took out the map. They stood holding it between them. Their orientation being governed by the wind, and beyond their power to correct mentally, they then laid the map on the ground, the top more or less to the north, and a grey stone on each corner.

'There's the line,' said Margaret, following it across the map with her finger. 'We must be somewhere about here.'

'How do you know we're not above the tunnel?' inquired Mimi. 'It's about four miles long.'

'I don't think we're high enough. 'The tunnel's further on.'

'Couldn't we strike this road?'

'Which way do you suggest?'

'Over the brow of the next hill, if you were right about that being a train. The road goes quite near the railway and the sound came from over there.' Mimi pointed, the web of her rucksack, as she lay twisted on the ground, dragging uncomfortably in the shoulder strap of her shirt.

'I wish we had a canvas map. The wind's tearing this one to pieces.'

Mimi replied amiably. 'It's a bore, isn't it?' It was she who had been responsible for the map.

'I'm almost sure you're right,' said Margaret, with all the confidence of the lost.

'Let's go,' said Mimi. With difficulty they folded up the map, and Mimi returned it to Margaret's rucksack. The four grey stones continued to mark the corners of a now mysterious rectangle.

As it chanced, Mimi was right. When they had descended to the valley before them, and toiled to the next ridge, a double line of railway and a stone-walled road climbed the valley beyond. While they watched, a train began slowly to chug upwards from far to the left.

'The other one must have been going downhill,' said Mimi.

They began the descent to the road. It was some time since there had been even a sheep path. The distance to the road was negligible as the crow flies, but it took them thirty-five minutes by Mimi's wrist-watch, and the crawling train passed before them almost as soon as they started.

'I wish we were crows,' Mimi exclaimed.

Margaret said, 'Yes,' and smiled.

They noticed no traffic on the road, which, when reached, proved to be surfaced with hard, irregular granite chips, somewhat in need of re-laying and the attentions of a steamroller.

'Pretty grim,' said Mimi after a quarter of an hour. 'But I'm through with that heather.' Both sides of the valley were packed with it.

'Hadn't we better try to find out exactly where we are?' suggested Margaret.

'Does it really matter?'

'There's lunch.'

'That doesn't depend on where we are. So long as we're in the country it's all one, don't you think?'

'I think we'd better make sure.'

'OK.'

Mimi again got out the map. As they were anchoring it by the roadside, a train roared into being and swept down the gradient.

'What are you doing?' asked Margaret, struggling with a rather unsuitable stone.

'Waving, of course.'

'Did anyone wave back?'

'Haven't you ever waved to the driver?'

'No. I don't think I have. I didn't know it was the driver you waved to. I thought it was the passengers.' The map now seemed secure.

'Them too sometimes. But drivers always wave to girls.'

'Only to girls?'

'Only to girls.' Mimi couldn't remember when she hadn't known that.
'Where are we?' They stared at the map, trying to drag out its mystery. Even now that they were on the road, with the railway plain before them crossing contour after contour, the problem seemed little simpler.

'I wish there was an instrument which said how high we were,' remarked Mimi.

'Something else to carry.'

Soon they were reduced to staring about them.

'Isn't that a house?' Mimi was again pointing the initiative.

'If it is, I think it must be "Inn".' Margaret indicated it. 'There's no other building on the map this side of the railway tunnel, unless we're much lower down the valley than we think.'

'Maps don't show every small building.'

'They seem to in country districts. I've been noticing. Each farm has a little dot. Even the cottage by the reservoir yesterday had its dot.'

'Oh well, if it's a pub, we can eat in the bar. OK by me.'

Again they left behind them four grey stones at the corners of nothing.

'Incidentally, the map only shows one house between the other end of the tunnel and Pudsley. A good eight miles, I should say.'

'Let's hope it's one of your farms. I won't face a night in Pudsley. We're supposed to be on holiday. Remember?'

'I expect they'll put us up.'

The building ahead of them proved long deserted. Or possibly not so long; it is difficult to tell with simple stone buildings in a wet climate. The windows were planked up; slates from the roof littered the weedy garden; the front door had been stove in.

'Trust the Army,' said Mimi. 'Hope tonight's quarters are more weatherproof. We'd better eat. It's a quarter past two.'

'I don't think it's the Army. More like the agricultural depression.' Margaret had learnt on her father's estate the significance of deserted farmhouses and neglected holdings.

'Look! There's the tunnel.'

Margaret advanced a few steps up the road to join her. From the black portal the tunnel bored straight into the rock, with the road winding steeply above it.

'There's another building,' said Margaret, following the discouraging ascent with her eyes. 'What's more, I can see a sign outside it. I believe the map's wrong. Come on.'

'Oh well,' said Mimi.

Just as they were over the tunnel entrance another train sped downwards. They looked from above at the blind black roofs of the coaches, like the caterpillar at the fair with the cover down.

It was hard to say whether the map was wrong or not. The house above the tunnel, though apparently not shown, was certainly not an inn. It was almost the exact opposite: an unlicensed Guest House.

'Good for a cup of tea,' said Mimi. 'But we'd better eat outside.'

A little further up the road was a small hillock. They ascended it, cast off their heavy rucksacks, loosened their belts a hole or two, and began to eat corned beef sandwiches. The Guest House lay below them, occupied to all appearances, but with no one visible.

'Not much traffic,' said Margaret, dangling a squashed tomato.

'They all go by train.'

The distant crowing of an engine whistle seemed to confirm her words.

The sharp-edged clouds, now slightly larger, were still being pushed across the sky; but by now the breeze seemed to have dropped and it was exceedingly hot. The two women were covered with sweat, and Mimi undid another button of her shirt.'

Aren't you glad I made you wear shorts?"

Margaret had to admit to herself she was glad. There had been some dissension between the two of them upon this point; Margaret, who had never worn shorts in her life before, feeling intensely embarrassed by Mimi's proposal, and Mimi unexpectedly announcing that she wouldn't come at all unless Margaret 'dressed like everybody else'. Margaret now realised that for once 'everybody' was right. The freedom was delightful; and without it the weight of the rucksack would have been unendurable. Moreover, her entire present outfit had cost less than a guinea; and it mattered little what happened to it. That, she perceived, was the real freedom. Still she was pleased that none of her family could see her.

'Very glad indeed,' she replied. 'I really am.'

Mimi smiled warmly, too nice to triumph, although the matter was one about which Margaret's original attitude had roused strong feelings in her.

'Not the ideal food for this heat,' said Margaret. 'We'll come out in spots.'

'Lucky to get corned beef. Another girl and I hiked from end to end of the Pilgrim's Way on plain bread and marge. It was Bank Holiday and we'd forgotten to lay anything in.' Then, springing to her feet with her mouth full, she picked up her rucksack. 'Let's try for a drink.' She was off down the road before Margaret could rise or even speak. She was given to acting on such sudden small impulses, Margaret had noticed.

By the time Margaret had finished her final sandwich, Mimi had rung the Guest House bell and had been inside for some time. Before following, Margaret wiped the sweat from her face on to one of the large handkerchiefs Mimi had prudently enjoined; then from one of the breast pockets of her shirt produced a comb and mirror, rearranged her hair so far as was allowed by sweat and the small tight bun into which, with a view to

efficiency on this holiday, she had woven it, and returned the articles to her shirt pocket, buttoning down the flap, but avoiding contact as far as possible with her sticky body. She approached the front door slowly, endeavouring to beget no further heat.

The bell, though provided with a modern pseudo-Italian pull, was of the authentic country house pattern, operated by a wire. The door was almost immediately opened by a plain woman in a Marks and Spencer overall.

'Yes?'

'Could I possibly have something to drink? My friend's inside already.'

'Come in. Tea or coffee? We're out of minerals.'

'Could I have some coffee?'

'Coffee.' The word was repeated in a short blank tone. One would have supposed she had to deal with sixty orders an hour. She disappeared.

'Well, shut the door and keep the heat out.'

The speaker, a middle-aged man wearing dirty tennis shoes, was seated the other side of a round wooden table from Mimi, who was stirring a cup of tea. There was no one else in the room, which was congested with depressing café furniture, and decorated with cigarette advertisements hanging askew on the walls.

'You know what they say in New York?' He had the accent of a north country businessman. His eyes never left Mimi's large breasts distending her damp khaki shirt. 'I used to live in New York. Ten years altogether.'

Mimi said nothing. It was her habit to let the men do the talking. Margaret sat down beside her, laying her rucksack on the floor.

'Hullo.' His tone was cheekier than his intention.

'Hullo,' said Margaret neutrally.

'Are you two friends?'

'Yes.'

His gaze returned to the buxomer, nakeder Mimi.

'I was just telling your friend. You know what they say in New York?'

'No,' said Margaret. 'I don't think so. What do they say?'

'It isn't the heat. It's the humidity.'

He seemed still to be addressing Margaret, while staring at Mimi. Giving them a moment to follow what he evidently regarded as a difficult and penetrating observation, he continued, 'The damp, you know. The moisture in the atmosphere. The atmosphere's picking up moisture all the time. Sucking it out of the earth.' He licked his lower lip. 'This is nothing. Nothing to New York. I lived there for ten years. Beggars can't be choosers, you know.'

A door opened from behind and the taciturn woman brought Margaret's coffee. The cup was discoloured round the edge, and the saucer, for some reason, bore a crimson smear.

'One shilling.'

Startled, Margaret produced a half-crown from a pocket of her shorts. The woman went away.

'Nice place this,' said the man. 'You've got to pay for that these times.'

Margaret lifted up her cup. The coffee was made from essence and stank.

'What did I say? How's that for a cup of coffee? I'd have one myself, if I hadn't had three already.'

'Are you staying here?'

'I live here.'

The woman returned with one and sixpence, then departed once more.

'There's no need for a gratuity.'

'I see,' said Margaret. 'Is she the proprietress?'

'It's her own place.'

'She seems silent.' Immediately Margaret rather regretted this general conversational initiative.

'She's reason to be. It's no gold mine, you know. I'm the only regular. Pretty well the only customer by and large.'

'Why's that? It's a lovely country, and there's not much competition from what we've seen.'

'There's none. Believe me. And it's not a nice country. Believe me again.'

'What's wrong with it?' This was Mimi, who had not spoken since Margaret had entered.

'Why nothing really, sister, nothing really. Not for a little girl like you.' Margaret noticed that he was one of the many men who classify women into those you talk to and those with whom words merely impede the way. 'I was just kidding. I wouldn't be here else. Now would I? Not living here.'

'What's wrong with the place?'

Margaret was surprised by Mimi's tone. She recollected that she had no knowledge of what had passed between the two of them while she had been combing her hair on the little hill.

'You know what the locals say?'

'We haven't seen any locals,' said Margaret.

'Just so. That's what I say. They don't come up here. This is the Quiet Valley.'

'Oh really,' cried Margaret, not fully mistress of her motives all the same. 'You got that name out of some Western.'

But he only replied with unusual brevity, 'They call it the Quiet Valley.'

'Not a good place to start in business!' said Margaret.

'Couldn't be worse. But she just didn't know. She sank all she had in this place. She was a stranger here, like you.'

'What's wrong with the valley?' persisted Mimi, her manner, to Margaret's mind, a little too tense.

'Nothing so long as you stay, sister. Just nothing at all.'

'Is there really a story?' asked Margaret. Almost convinced that the whole thing was a rather dull joke, she was illogically driven to enquire by Mimi's odd demeanour.

'No *story* that I've heard of. It's just the Quiet Valley and the locals don't come here.'

'What about you? If it's so quiet why don't you move?'

'I like quiet. I'm not one to pick and choose. I was just telling you why there's a trade recession.'

'It's perfectly true,' said Margaret, 'that there seems very little traffic.' She noticed Mimi refasten the shirt button she had undone to cool herself. The man averted his eyes.

'They all take the railroad. They scuttle through shut up like steers in a wagon.'

Mimi said nothing, but her expression had changed.

'There seem to be plenty of trains for them,' said Margaret, smiling.

'It's the main line.'

'One of the drivers waved to us. If what you say is true, I suppose he was glad to see us.'

For the first time the man concentrated his unpleasing stare on Margaret.

'Now as to that –' His glance fell to the table and remained there a moment. 'I was just wondering where you two reckon on spending the night.'

'We usually find a farmhouse,' said Margaret shortly.

'It's wild on the other side, you know. Wilder than here. There's only one house between the tunnel and near Pudsley.'

'So we noticed on the map. Would they give us a bed? I suppose it's a farm?'

'It's Miss Roper's place. I've never met her myself. I don't go down the other side. But I dare say she'd help you. What you said just now –' Suddenly he laughed. 'You know how engine drivers wave at girls, like you said?'

'Yes,' said Margaret. To her apprehension it seemed that an obscene joke was coming.

'Well, every time a train passes Miss Roper's house, someone leans out of the bedroom window and waves to it. It's gone on for years. Every train, mark you. The house stands back from the line and the drivers couldn't see exactly who it was, but it was someone in white and they all thought it was a girl. So they waved back. Every train. But the joke is it's not a girl at all. It can't be. It's gone on too long. She can't have been a girl for the last twenty years or so. It's probably old Miss Roper herself. The drivers keep changing round so they don't catch on. They all think it's some girl, you see. So they all wave back. Every train.' He was laughing as if it were the funniest of improprieties.

'If the drivers don't know, how do you?' asked Mimi.

'It's what the locals say. Never set eyes on Miss Roper myself. Probably a bit of line-shooting.' He became suddenly very serious and redolent of quiet helpfulness. 'There's a Ladies Room upstairs if either of you would like it.'

'Thank you,' said Margaret. 'I think we must be getting on.' The back of her rucksack was soaked and clammy.

'Have a cigarette before you go?' He was extending a packet of some unknown brand. His hand shook like the hand of a drug addict.

'Thanks,' said Mimi, very offhand. 'Got a match?' He could hardly strike it, let alone light the cigarette. Looking at him Margaret was glad she did not smoke.

'I smoke like a camp fire,' he said unnecessarily. 'You have to in my life.' Then, when they had opened the door, he added, 'Watch the weather.'

'We will,' said Margaret conventionally, though the heat had again smothered them. And once more they were toiling upwards beneath their heavy packs.

They said nothing at all for several minutes. Then Mimi said, 'Blasted fool.'

'Men are usually rather horrible,' replied Margaret.

'You get used to *that*,' said Mimi.

'I wonder if this really is called the Quiet Valley?'

'I don't care what it's called. It's a bad valley all right.'

Margaret looked at her. Mimi was staring defiantly ahead as she strode forward. 'You mean because there are no people?'

'I mean because I know it's bad. You can't explain it.'

Margaret was inexpert with intuitions, bred out of them perhaps. The baking, endless road was certainly becoming to her unpleasant in the extreme. Moreover, the foul coffee had given her indigestion, and the looseness of her belt made it impossible to loosen it further.

'If you hadn't heard that train, we'd never have been here.'

'If I hadn't heard it, we'd quite simply have been lost. The path on the map just gave out. That's apt to happen when you merely choose paths instead of making for definite places.'

In her vexation Margaret raked over another underlying dissimilarity in their approaches to life, one already several times exposed. Then reflecting that Mimi had been perfectly willing to wend from point to point provided that the points were Youth Hostels, Margaret added, 'Sorry Mimi. It's the heat.'

A certain persistent fundamental disharmony between them led Mimi to reply none too amicably, 'What exactly do you suggest we *are* going to do?'

Had Margaret been Mimi there would have been a row: but, being Margaret, she said, 'I think perhaps we'd better take another look at the map.'

This time she unslung her rucksack and got out the map herself. Mimi stood sulkily sweating and doing nothing either to help or to remove the sweat. Looking at her, Margaret suddenly said, 'I wonder what's become of the breeze we had this morning?' Then, Mimi still saying nothing, she sat down and looked at the map. 'We could go over into the next valley. There are several quite large villages.'

'Up there?' Mimi indicated the rocky slope rising steeply above them.

'The tunnel runs through where the mountains are highest. If we go on a bit, we'll reach the other end and it may be less of a climb. What do you say?'

Mimi took a loose cigarette from a pocket of her shirt. 'Not much else to do, is there?' Her attitude was exceedingly irritating. Margaret perceived the unwisdom of strong Indian tea in the middle of the day. 'I hope we make it,' added Mimi with empty cynicism. As she struck a match, in the very instant a gust of wind not only blew it out but wrenched the map from Margaret's hands. It was as if the striking of the match had conjured up the means to its immediate extinction.

Margaret, recovering, closed the map; and they looked behind them. 'Oh hell,' said Margaret. 'I dislike the weather in the Quiet Valley.' A solid bank of the dark grey cloud had formed in their rear and was perceptibly closing down upon them like a huge hood.

'I hope we make it,' repeated Mimi, her cynicism now less empty. They left their third set of grey stones demarcating emptiness.

Before long they were over the ridge at the top of the valley. The prospect ahead entirely confirmed the sentiments of the man at the Guest House. The scene could hardly have been bleaker or less inviting. But as it was much cooler, and the way for the first time in several hours comfortably downhill, they marched forward with once-more tightened belts, keeping strictly in step, blown forward by a rising wind. The recurring tension between them was now dissipated by efficient exertion under physically pleasant conditions; by the renewed sense of objective. They conversed steadily and amiably, the distraction winging their feet. Margaret felt the contrast between the optimism apparently implicit in the weather when they had set out, and the doom implicit in it now; but she felt it not unagreeably, drew from it a pleasing sense of tragedy and fitness. That was how she felt until well after it had actually begun to rain.

The first slow drops flung on the back of her knees and neck by the following wind were sweetly sensuous. She could have thrown herself upon the grass and let the rain slowly engulf her entire skin until there was no dry inch. Then she said, 'We mustn't get rheumatic fever in these sweaty clothes.'

Mimi had stopped and unslung her rucksack. Mimi's rucksack was the heavier because its contents included a robust stormproof raincoat; Margaret's the less heavy because she possessed only a light town mackintosh. Mimi encased herself, adjusted her rucksack beneath the shoulder straps of the raincoat, tied a sou'wester tightly beneath her chin, and strode forward, strapped and buttoned up to the ears, as if cyclones were all in a day's work. After a quarter of an hour, Margaret felt rain beginning to trickle down her body from the loose neck of her mackintosh, to infiltrate through the fabric in expanding blots, and to be finding its way

most disagreeably into the interior of the attached hood. After half an hour she was saturated.

By that time they had reached the far end of the tunnel and stood looking down into a deep, narrow cutting which descended the valley as far as the gusts of rain permitted them to see. Being blasted through rock, the cutting had unscalably steep sides.

'That's that,' said Margaret a little shakily. 'We'll have to stick to the Quiet Valley.'

'It looks all right the other side,' said Mimi, 'if only we could get over.' Despite her warm garb, she, too seemed wan and shivery. On their side of the railway, and beyond the road that had brought them, was a sea of soaking knee-high heather; but across the cutting the ground rose in a fairly gentle slope, merely tufted with vegetation.

'There's no sign of a bridge.'

'I could use a cup of tea. Do you know it's twenty-five past six?'

As they stood uncertain, the sound of an ascending train reached them against the wind, which, blowing strongly from the opposite direction, kept the smoke within the walls of the cutting. So high was the adverse gale that it was only a minute between their first hearing the slowly climbing train and its coming level with them. Steam roared from the exhaust. The fireman was stoking demoniacally. As the engine passed to windward of the two women far above, and the noise from the exhaust crashed upon their senses, the driver suddenly looked up and waved with an apparent gaiety inappropriate to the horrible weather. Then he reached for the whistle lever and, as the train entered the tunnel, for forty seconds doubled the already unbearable uproar. It was a long tunnel.

The train was not of a kind Margaret was used to (she knew little of railways); it was composed neither of passenger coaches nor of small clattering trucks, but of long windowless vans, giving no hint of their contents. A nimbus of warm oily air enveloped her, almost immediately to be blown away, leaving her again shivering.

Mimi had not waved back.

They resumed their way. Margaret's rucksack, though it weighed like the old man of the sea, kept a large stretch of her back almost dry.

'Do the drivers always wave first?' asked Margaret for something to say.

'Of course. If you were to wave first, they probably wouldn't notice you. There's something wrong with girls who wave first anyway.'

'I wonder what's wrong with Miss Roper?'

'We'll be seeing.'

'I suppose so. She doesn't sound much of a night's prospect.'

'How far's Pudsley?'

'Eight miles.'

'Very well then.'

Previously it had been Mimi who had seemed so strongly to dislike the valley. It was odd that, as it appeared, she should envisage so calmly the slightly sinister Miss Roper. Odd but practical. Margaret divined that her own consistency of thought and feeling might not tend the more to well-being than Mimi's weathercock moods.

'Where exactly does Miss Roper hang out, do you suppose?' enquired Mimi. 'That's the first point.'

The only visible work of man, other than the rough road, was the long gash that marked the railway cutting to their left.

'The map hasn't proved too accurate,' said Margaret.

'Hadn't we better look all the same? I'm really thinking of you, dear. You must be like a wet rag. Of you and a cup of tea.'

The wind was very much more than it had so far at any time been, but they could find no anchoring stones. Walls had long since ceased to line the road, and there appeared to be no stones larger than pebbles. While they were poking under clumps of heather, a train descended, whistling continuously.

In the end they had to give up. The paper map, on being partly opened, immediately rent across. The downpour would have converted it into discoloured pulp in a few moments. They were both so tired and hungry, and Margaret, by general temperament the more determined, so wet, that they had no heart in the struggle. Mimi stuffed the already sodden lump back into Margaret's rucksack.

'We'd better get on with it, even if we have to traipse all the way to Pudsley,' she said, re-tying a shoelace and then tightening her raincoat collar strap. 'Else we'll have you in hospital.' She marched forward intrepid.

But in the end, the road, which had long been deteriorating unnoticed, ended in a gate, beyond which was simply a rough field. They had reached a level low enough for primitive cultivation once to have been possible. Soaked and wretched though she was, Margaret looked back to the ridge, and saw that the distance to it was very much less than she had supposed. They leaned on the gate and stared ahead. Stone walls had reappeared, cutting up the land into monotonously similar untended plots. There were still no trees. The railway had now left the cutting and could presumably be crossed; but the women did not make the attempt, as visible before them through the flying deluge was a black house. It stood about six fields away: no joke to reach.

'Why's it so black?' asked Margaret.

'Pudsley. Those chimneys you're so fond of.'

'The prevailing wind's in the other direction. It's behind us.'

'Wish I had my climbing boots,' said Mimi, as they waded into the long grass. 'Or Wellingtons.' The grass soaked the double hem of Margaret's mackintosh, which she found a new torture. Two trains passed each other,

grinding up and charging down. Both appeared to be normal passenger trains, long and packed. Every single window was closed. This produced an odd effect, as of objects in a bottle; until one realised that it was, of course, a consequence of the weather.

By the time they had stumbled across the soaking fields, and surmounted the high craggy walls between, it was almost completely dark. The house was a square, gaol-like stone box, three storeys high, built about 1860, and standing among large but unluxuriant cypresses. the first trees below the valley ridge. The blackness of the building was no effect of the light, but the consequence of inlaid soot.

'It's right on top of the railway,' cried Mimi. Struggling through the murk, they had not noticed that.

There was a huge front door, grim with grime.

'What a hope!' said Mimi, as she hauled on the bell handle.

'It's a curious bell,' said Margaret, examining the mechanism and valiant to the soaking, shivering end. 'It's like the handles you see in signal boxes.'

The door was opened by a figure illumined only by an oil lamp standing on a wall bracket behind.

'What is it?' The not uneducated voice had a curious throat undertone.

'My friend and I are on a walking tour,' said Margaret, who, as the initiator of the farmhouses project, always took charge on these occasions. 'We got badly lost on the moors. We hoped to reach Pudsley,' she continued, seeing that this was no farmhouse, open to a direct self-invitation. 'But what with getting lost and the rain, we're in rather a mess. Particularly me. I wonder if you could possibly help us? I know it's outrageous, but we *are* in distress.'

'Of course,' said another voice from the background. 'Come in and get warm. Come in quickly and Beech will shut the door.' This slight inverted echo of the words of the man at the Guest House stirred unpleasing associations in Margaret's brain.

The weak light disclosed Beech to be a tall muscular figure in a servant's black suit. The face, beneath a mass of black hair, cut like a musician's, seemed smooth and pale. The second speaker was a handsome well-built man, possibly in the late forties, and also wearing a black suit and tie, which suggested mourning. He regarded the odd figures of the two women without any suggestion of the unusual, as they lowered their dripping rucksacks to the tiled floor, unfastened their outer clothes running with water, and stood before him, two dim khaki figures, in shirts and shorts. Margaret felt not only ghastly wet but as if she were naked.

'Let me introduce myself,' said the master of the house. 'I am Wendley Roper. I shall expect you both to dine with me and stay the night. Tomorrow will put an entirely different face on things.' A slight lordliness of manner, by no means unattractive to Margaret, suggested that he mingled little with modern men.

Margaret introduced Mimi and herself; then said, 'We heard higher up the valley that a Miss Roper lived here.'

'My aunt. She died very recently. You see.' He indicated his clothes.

'I am so sorry,' said Margaret conventionally.

'It was deeply distressing. I refer to the manner of her death.' He offered the shivering women no details, but continued, 'Now Beech will take you to your room. The Rafters Room, Beech. I fear I have no other available, as the whole first floor and much else is taken up by my grandfather's collection. I trust you will have no objection to occupying the same room? It is a primitive one, I regret to say. There is only one bed at present, but I shall have another moved up.'

They assured him they had no objection.

'What about clothes? My aunt's would scarcely serve.' Then, unexpectedly, he added, 'And Beech is too big and tall for either of you.'

'It's quite all right,' said Margaret. 'Our rucksacks are watertight and we've both got a change.'

'Good,' said Wendley Roper seriously. 'Beech will conduct you, and dinner will be served when you've changed. There'll be some hot water sent up.'

'You are being most extraordinarily kind to us,' said Margaret.

'We should take the chances life brings us,' said Wendley Roper.

Beech lit a second oil lamp which had been standing on a large tallboy, and, with the women carrying their rucksacks, imperfectly illuminated the way upstairs. On the first-floor landing there were several large doors, such as admit to the bedrooms of a railway hotel, but no furniture was to be seen anywhere, nor were the staircase or either landing carpeted. At the top of the house Beech admitted them to a room the door of which required unlocking. He did not stand aside to let them enter first, but went straight in and drew heavy curtains before the windows, having set down the light on the floor. The women joined him. This time there was a heavy brown carpet, but the primitiveness of the room was indisputable. Beyond the carpet and matching curtains, the furnishings consisted solely of a bedstead. It was a naked iron bedstead, crude and ugly.

'I'll bring you hot water, as Mr Roper said. Then a basin and towels and some chairs and so forth.'

'Thank you,' said Margaret. Beech retired, closing the door.

'Wonder if the door locks?' Mimi crossed the room. 'Not it. The key's on Beech's chain. I don't fancy Beech.'

'Can't be helped.' Margaret had already discarded her clothes, and was drying her body on a small towel removed from her rucksack.

'I'm not wet through, like you, but God it's cold for the time of year.' Mimi's alternative outfit consisted of a dark grey polo-necked sweater and a pair of lighter flannel trousers. Soon she had donned it, first putting on a brassière and knickers to mark renewed contact with society. 'Bit of a pigsty, isn't it?' she continued. 'But I suppose we must give thanks.'

'I rather liked our host. At least he didn't shilly-shally about taking us in.' Margaret was towelling systematically.

'Got a nice voice too.' Mimi decided that she would be warmer with her sweater inside her trousers, and made the alteration. 'Unlike Beech. Beech talks like plum jam. Where, by the way, are the rafters?'

The room, which was much longer than it was wide, and contained windows only in each end wall, a great distance apart, was ceiled with orthodox, though cracked and dirty, plaster.

'I expect they're just above us.'

'Up there?' Mimi indicated a trap-door in a corner of the ceiling.

Margaret had not previously noticed it. But before she could speak, the room was filled with a sudden rumbling crescendo, which made the massive floorboards vibrate and the light bed leap up and down upon them. Even the big black stones of the walls seemed slightly to jostle.

'The trains!'

Dashing to a window, Mimi dragged back the curtains, and lifting the sash, waved, her mood suddenly one of excitement, as the uproar swept down towards Pudsley.

Then she cried, 'Margaret! The window's barred.'

But Margaret's attention was elsewhere. During the din the door had opened, and Beech, a large old-fashioned can steaming in one hand, a large old-fashioned wash-basin dangling from the other, was in the room, and she absurdly naked.

'I beg your pardon,' he was saying. 'I don't think you heard me knock.'

'Get out,' said Mimi, flaming, her soul fired by an immemorial tabu.

'It's perfectly all right,' intervened Margaret, grasping the small wet towel.

'I'll fetch you some towels.'

He was gone again. He seemed totally undisturbed.

'He couldn't help it,' said Margaret. 'It was the train.'

Mimi lowered the window and re-drew the thick curtains. 'I've an idea,' she said.

'Oh! What? About Beech?'

'I'll tell you later. I'm going to wait at the door.'

Soon Beech returned with two large and welcome bath towels and a huge, improbable new cake of expensive scented soap. Margaret had filled the rose-encircled basin with glorious hot water; but before washing, Mimi stood by the door to receive two simple wooden bedroom chairs, a large wooden towel-horse and a capacious chamber-pot, before Beech descended to assist with dinner. 'I'll set you up another bed and bring along some bedding later,' he said, as his tall shape descended the tenebrous stair, now lit at intervals by oil lamps flickering on brackets.

Mimi rolled up the sleeves of her sweater and immersed her rather fat arms to the elbows. Margaret was drawing on a girdle. Her spare clothes consisted in another shirt, similar to the one the rain had soaked, but stiff and unworn, a cream-coloured linen skirt of fashionable length, and a tie which matched the skirt. She also had two pairs of expensive stockings, and a spare pair of shoes of lighter weight than Mimi's. Soon she was dressed, had knotted her tie, and was easing the stockings up what she felt must be starkly weather-roughed legs. She felt wonderfully dry, warm, and well. Her underclothes felt delightful. She felt that, after all, things might have turned out worse.

While Margaret was dressing, Mimi had been scrubbing her hands and forearms, then submitting her short hair to a vigorous, protracted grooming with a small bristly hairbrush. She was to busy to speak. She concentrated upon her simple toilet with an absorption Margaret would not have brought to dressing for her first dinner in evening clothes with a man.

With one stocking attached to its suspender, the other blurring her ankle, Margaret leaned back comfortably and asked, 'What was your idea?'

Mimi returned brush and comb to her rucksack. 'I think it's obvious. Old Ma Roper was mad.'

Margaret's warm world waned a little. 'You mean the window bars? This might have been a nursery.'

'Not only. You remember what he said? "The manner of her death was deeply distressing." And that's not all.'

'What else?'

'Don't you remember? Her waving to the trains?'

'I don't think that means she was mad. She might merely have been lonely.'

'Long time to be lonely. Let's go down if you're ready.'

Beech was waiting for them in the gloomy hall. 'This way, please.'

He opened a huge door and they entered the dining room.

Very large plates, dishes, and cutlery covered the far end of a heavy-looking wooden table, at the head of which sat their host, with a place laid on either side of him. The room was lit by two sizzling oil lamps, vast and of antiquated pattern, which hung from heavy circular plaster mouldings in the discoloured ceiling. The marble and iron fireplace was in massive keeping with the almost immovable waiting-room chairs. On the dark-green lincrusta of the walls engravings hung behind glass so dirty that in the weak green light it was difficult to make out the subjects. A plain round clock clicked like a revolving turnstile from above the fireplace. As the women appeared, it jerked from 2:26 to 2:27. By habit Mimi looked at her watch. The time was just after eight o'clock.

'Immediately you entered the house, the rain stopped,' said Wendley Roper by way of greeting.

'Then we'd better be on our way after dinner,' said Mimi.

'Most certainly not. I meant only that if you'd arrived a few minutes later, I might have lost the pleasure of your company. Will you sit here?' He was drawing back the heavy chair for Mimi to sit on his right. Beech performed the like office for Margaret. 'I should have been utterly disconsolate. You both look remarkably attractive.'

Beech disappeared and returned with a tureen so capacious that neither of the women would have cared to lift it. Roper ladled out soup into the huge plates. As he did so, a train roared past outside.

'I suppose the railway came after the house had been here some time?' asked Margaret, feeling that some reference to the matter seemed called for.

'By no means,' answered Roper. 'The man who built the railway, built the house. He was my grandfather, Joseph Roper, generally known as Wide Joe. Wide Joe liked trains.'

'There's not much else for company,' remarked Mimi, engulfing the hot soup.

'This was one of the last main line railways to be built,' continued Roper. 'Everyone said it was impossible, but they were keen all the same, partly because land in this valley was very cheap, as it still is. But my grandfather was an engineering genius, and in the end he did it. The engravings in this room show the different stages of the work.'

'I suppose he regarded it as his masterpiece and wanted to live next to it when he retired?' politely enquired Margaret.

'Not when he retired. As a matter of fact, he never did retire. He built this house right at the beginning of the work and lived here until the end. The railway took twenty years to build.'

'I don't know much about railway building, but that's surely a very long time?'

'There were difficulties. Difficulties of a kind my grandfather had never expected. The cost of them ruined the company, which had to amalgamate in consequence. They nearly drove my grandfather mad.' Margaret could not stop herself from glancing at Mimi. 'Everything conspired together against him. Things happened which he had not looked for.'

Beech reappeared and, removing the soup, substituted a pile of sausages contained in a rampart of mashed potato. As he manœuvred the hot and heavy dish, Margaret noticed a large, dull coal-black ring on the third finger of his left hand.

'Primitive fare,' apologized Roper. 'All you can get nowadays.'

None the less, the two women found it unbelievably welcome.

'I do see now what you might call railway influences about the house,' said Margaret.

'My grandfather lived in the days when a railway engineer was responsible for every detail of design. Not only of the tunnels and bridges, but the locomotives and carriages, the stations and signals, even the posters and tickets. He had sole responsibility for everything. An educated man could never have stood the strain. Wide Joe educated himself.'

At intervals through dinner, passing trains rattled the heavy table and heavy objects upon it.

'Now tell me about yourselves,' said Wendley Roper, as if he had just concluded the narrative of his own life. 'But first have another sausage each. There's only stewed fruit ahead.' They accepted.

'We're civil servants,' said Mimi. 'That's what brought us together. I come from London, and Margaret comes from Devonshire. My father is a hairdresser and Margaret's father is a Lord. Now you know all about us.'

'An entirely bankrupt Lord, I regret to say,' added Margaret quietly.

'I gather more Lords are bankrupt in these times,' said Roper sympathetically.

'And many hairdressers,' said Mimi.

'Everyone but civil servants, in fact?' said Roper.

'That's why we're civil servants,' replied Mimi, eviscerating her last sausage from its inedible skin. 'Though you don't seem altogether bankrupt,' she added. Food was increasing her vitality.

He made no reply. Beech had entered with a big glass bowl, deeply but unbeautifully cut, filled with stewed damsons.

'The local fruit,' said Roper despondently.

But they even ate stewed damsons.

'I am absolutely delighted to have you here,' he remarked when he had served them. 'I see almost no one. Least of all attractive women.'

His tones were so direct and sincere that Margaret immediately felt pleased. Having, until this year she took a job, lived all her life against a background of desperate and, as she thought, undeserved money troubles, and in a remote country district, she had had little to do with men. Even such a simple compliment from a good-looking and well-spoken man still meant disproportionately much to her. She observed that Mimi seemed to notice nothing whatever.

'I don't know what would have become of us without you,' said Margaret.

'Food for the crows,' said Mimi.

Suddenly the conversation loosened up, becoming comparatively cordial, intimate, and general. Roper disclosed himself as intelligent, well-informed, and a good listener to those less intelligent and well-informed, at least when they were young women. Mimi's conversation became much steadier and more pointed than usual. Margaret found herself saying less and less, while enjoying herself more.

'Beech will bring us coffee in the drawing-room,' said Roper, 'if drawing-room's the right expression.'

They moved across the hall to another bleak apartment, this time walled with official-looking books, long series of volumes bound in dark-blue cloth or in stout, rough-edged paper. Again there were two complicated but not very efficient lamps hissing and spurting from the coffered ceiling. The furniture consisted in old-fashioned leather-covered armchairs and sofas; and, before the window at the end of the room, a huge desk, bearing high heaps of varied documents, disused and dusty. About the room in glass cases were scale models of long-extinct locomotives and bygone devices for ensuring safety on the railways. Above the red marble mantel was a vast print of a railway accident, freely coloured by hand.

'You do keep things as the old man left them,' said Mimi.

'It is a house of the dead,' said Roper. 'My aunt, you know. She would never have anything touched.'

Beech brought coffee: not very good and served in over-large cups; but pleasantly warm. Margaret still found the house cold. She hoped she was not ill after the soaking and strain of the day. She continued, however, to listen to Mimi and Roper chatting together in surprising sympathy; every now and then made an observation of her own; and, thinking things over, wondered that on the whole they had turned out so well. It was Margaret who poured out the coffee.

What were Mimi and Roper talking about? He was asking her in great detail about their dull office routine; she was enquiring with improbable enthusiasm into early railway history. Neither could have had much genuine interest in either subject. It was all very unreal, but comfortable and pleasing. Roper, many aspects of whose position seemed to Margaret to invite curiosity, said nothing of himself. Every now and then a train passed.

'A pension at sixty doesn't make up for being a number all your life. A cipher. You want to get off the rails every now and then.'

'You only get on to a branch line, a dead end,' said Roper with what seemed real despondency. 'It's difficult to leave the rails altogether and still keep going at all.'

'Have you ever tried? What *do* you do?' It was seldom so long before Mimi asked that. She despised inaction in men.

'I used to work in the railway company's office. All the Ropers were in the railway business, as you will have gathered. I was the only one to get out of it in time.'

'In time for what?'

'In time for anything. My father was the company's Chief Commercial Manager. Trying to meet the slump killed him. Things aren't what they used to be with railways, you know. My grandfather was run over just outside that window.' He pointed across the dusty desk at the end of the room.

'What a perfectly appalling thing!' said Margaret. 'How did it happen?'

'He never had any luck after he took on this job. You know how two perfectly harmless substances when blended can make something deadly? Building the railway through this valley was just like that for my grandfather. A lot of things happened.... One thing the valley goes in for is sudden storms. On a certain night when one of these storms got up, my grandfather thought he heard a tree fall. You noticed the trees round the house? The original idea was that they'd provide shelter. My grandfather thought this tree might have fallen across the line. He was so concerned that he forgot the time-table, though normally he carried every train movement in his head. You can guess what happened. The noise of the approaching train was drowned by the wind. Or so they decided at the inquest.'

When a comparative stranger tells such a story, it is always difficult to know what to say, and there is a tendency to fill the gap with some unimportant question. 'And was the tree across the line?' asked Margaret.

'Not it. No tree had fallen. The old man had got it wrong.'

'Then surely they were rather lax at the inquest?'

'Wide Joe had always been expected to meet a bad end, and the jury were all local men. He was pretty generally disliked. He made his daughter break off her engagement with a railwayman at Pudsley depot. Marrying into the lower deck, and all that. But it turned out he was a bit wrong. The man got into Parliament and ended by doing rather better for himself than my grandfather had done by sticking to the railway. By then, of course, it was too late. And my grandfather was dead in any case.'

'That was your aunt?' inquired Mimi.

'Being my father's sister, yes,' said Roper. 'Now let us change the subject. Tell me about the gay world of London.'

'We never come across it,' said Mimi. It's just one damn thing after another for us girls.'

The moment seemed opportune for Margaret to get her pullover, as she still felt cold. She departed upstairs. In some ways she would have been glad to go to bed, after the exhausting day; but she felt also an unexplained reluctance, less than half-conscious, to leave Mimi and Roper chatting so intimately alone together. Then, ascending the dim staircase with its enormous ugly polished banisters in dark wood, she received a shock which drove sleep temporarily from her.

The incident was small and perfectly reasonable; it was doubtless the dead crepuscularity of the house which made it seem frightening to Margaret. When she reached the first-floor landing she saw a figure which seemed hastily to be drawing back from her and then to retreat through one of the big panelled doors. The impression of furtiveness might well have resulted solely from the exceedingly poor lighting. But as to the opening and shutting of the door, Margaret's ears left her in no doubt. And upon another point their evidence confirmed the much less dependable testimony of her eyes: the withdrawing feet tapped; the half-visible figure was undoubtedly a woman's. She appeared to be wearing a dark coat and skirt, which left her lighter legs more clearly discernible.

Stamping on absurd fears, quite beyond definition, Margaret ascended the second flight and entered the bedroom. After all, it was quite probable that Beech did not do all the work of the house: most likely that Roper's staff should consist of a married couple. Margaret sat upon one of the hard chairs Beech had brought, and faced her fear more specifically. It took shape before the eyes of her mind: a faceless waxwork labelled 'Miss Roper', mad, dead, horribly returned. The costume of the figure Margaret had seen was not that of the tragic Victorian in Wendley Roper's narrative: but then Miss Roper had died only recently, and might have kept up with the times in this respect, as more and more old ladies do. That would be less likely, however, if she had really been mad, as Mimi had suggested, and as the tale of the broken engagement would certainly require had it been told by one of the period's many novelists.

The room Margaret was in had seen it all. Suddenly, as this fact returned to memory, the grimy dingy papered walls seemed simultaneously to jerk towards her, the whole rather long and narrow attic to contract upon her threateningly. Though enormously larger, the room suddenly struck Margaret as having the proportions of a railway compartment, a resemblance much increased by the odd arrangement of the windows, one at each end. Old-fashioned railway carriage windows were commonly barred, Margaret was just old enough to have noticed. This recollection brought rather more comfort than was strictly reasonable. Relaxing a little, Margaret found that she had been seated motionless. Her muscles were stiff and she could hear her heart and pulses, whether or not proceeding at the normal rate it was hard to say. Some time must have passed while she had sat in what amounted to a trance of fear. But their only watch was on Mimi's wrist, her own having been stolen while she washed in the Ladies Lavatory of an expensive restaurant to which her father had taken her for her birthday. Above all, she was colder than ever. She extracted the pullover from her rucksack and put it on. It was V-necked and long-sleeved. The warmth of its elegant, closely woven black wool was cheering. Before once more descending, Margaret adjusted the lamp which had been left in the bedroom. Then she recalled Roper's remark that the whole first floor of the house was occupied by his grandfather's collection; which for some reason did not make the actions of the woman she had seen seem more reassuring. But a minute later she crossed the first-floor landing firmly, though

certainly without making any investigation; and reached the door of the preposterous 'drawing-room' without (she was quite surprised to realise) any particular incident.

Immediately she entered, however, it was obvious that the atmosphere in the room had very much altered since she had left. Her fears were cut off like the change of scene in a film, to be replaced by a confused emotion as strong and undefined as the very different sensations which had accompanied the short period between her glimpsing the woman on the stairs and reaching the chair in her bedroom. Not only were Mimi and Roper now seated together on the vast leather-covered sofa before the empty fireplace, but Margaret even felt that they had vulgarly drawn further away from each other upon hearing her return.

'Hullo,' said Mimi cheekily. 'You've been a long time.'

For a moment Margaret felt like giving the situation a twist in her direction (as she felt it would be), by relating some of the reason for her long absence; but, in view of the mystery about Miss Roper, managed to abstain. Could it be that Miss Roper was not dead at all? she suddenly wondered.

'Mind your own business,' she replied in Mimi's own key.

'I hope you found your way,' said Roper politely.

'Perfectly, thank you.'

There was a short silence.

'I fear Beech has gone to bed, or I'd offer you both some further refreshments. I have no other servant.'

After the initial drag of blood from her stomach, Margaret took a really hard pull on her resolution.

'Do you live alone here with Beech?'

'Quite alone. That's why it's so pleasant to have you two with me. I've been telling Mimi that normally I have only my books.' It was the first time

Margaret had heard him use the Christian name.

'He leads the life of a recluse,' said Mimi. 'Research, you know. Dog's life, if you ask me. Worse than ours.'

'What do you research into?' asked Margaret.

'Can't you guess, dear?' Mimi had become very much at her ease.

'Railways, I'm afraid. Railway history.' Roper was smiling a scholar's smile, tired and deprecating, but at the same time uniquely arrogant. 'If you're a Roper you can't get it quite out of the blood. I've been showing Mimi this.' He held out a book with a dark-green jacket.

'Early Fishplates,' read Margaret, 'by Howard Bullhead.' The print appeared closely packed and extremely technical. The book was decorated with occasional arid little diagrams.

'What has this to do with railways?'

'Fishplates,' cried Mimi, 'are what hold the rails down.'

'Well, not quite that,' said Roper, 'but something like it.'

'Who's Mr. Bullhead?'

'Bullhead is a rather technical railway joke. I'm the real author. I prefer to use a pseudonym.'

'The whole book's one long mad thrill,' said Mimi. 'Wendley's going to sell the film rights.'

'I can't get it altogether out of my blood,' said Roper again. 'The family motto might be the same as Bismarck's: Blood and Iron.'

'Do you *want* to get it out?' asked Margaret. 'I'm sure it's a fascinating book.'

But Mimi had leapt to her feet. 'What about a cup of tea? What do you say *I* make it?'

Roper hesitated for a moment. Margaret thought that disinclination to accede conflicted with desire to please Mimi.

'I'll help.' Normally tea at night was so little Margaret's habit that Mimi stared at her.

'That would be very nice indeed,' said Roper at last. Desire to please Mimi had doubtless prevailed, though indeed it was hard to see what else he could say. 'I'll show you the kitchen. It's really very nice of you.' He hesitated another moment. Then they both followed him from the room.

Before the kettle had boiled in the square cold kitchen, Margaret's mind was in another conflict. Roper no longer seemed altogether so cultivated and charming as towards the end of dinner; there were now recurrent glimpses in him of showiness and even silliness. The maddening thing was, however, that Margaret could no longer be unaware that she found him attractive. Some impulse of which her experience was small and her opinion adverse, was loose in her brain, like the spot of light in a column of mercury. Upon other matters her mind was perfectly clear; so that she felt like two people, one thinking, one willing. Possibly even there was a third person, who was feeling; who was feeling very tired indeed.

Mimi, sometimes so quick to tire, seemed utterly unflagging. She darted about the strange domesticities, turning taps, assembling crocks, prattling about the gas cooker: 'Your gas doesn't smell. I call that service.'

'The smell is *added* to coal gas as a safety precaution,' said Roper.

'Why don't they choose a nice smell, then?'

'What would you suggest?'

'I don't mean Chanel, but new-mown hay or lovely roses.'

'The Gas Board don't want all their customers in love with easeful death.'

'What's your favourite method of committing suicide?'

Though this was one of Mimi's most customary topics, Margaret wished that she had chosen another. But Roper merely replied, 'Old age, I think.' He seemed fascinated by her. Neither he nor Margaret was doing anything to help with the preparations. In the end Mimi began positively to sing and the empty interchange of remarks came to an end.

As Mimi was filling the teapot, Roper unexpectedly departed.

'Do you like him?' asked Margaret.

'He's all right. Wonder if there's anything to eat with it.' Mimi began to peer into vast clanging bread bins.

'Have you found out anything more about him?'

'Not a thing.'

'Don't you think it's all rather queer?'

'Takes all sorts to make a world, dear.'

'It seems to take an odd sort to make a railway. You yourself suggested –' But Roper returned.

'I thought we might end this delightful evening in my den; my study, you know. It's much warmer and cosier. I don't usually show it to visitors. I like to keep somewhere quite private. For work, you know. But you are no ordinary visitors. I've just looked in and there's even a fire burning.' This last slightly odd remark was not to Margaret made less odd by the way it was spoken; as if the speaker had prepared in advance a triviality too slight to sustain preparation convincingly. 'Do come along. Let me carry the tray.'

'I've been looking for something to eat,' said Mimi. 'Do you think Beech has laid by any buns or anything?'

'There's some cake in my den,' said Roper, like the hero of a good book for boys.

This time the door was open and the room flooding the hall with cheerful light.

It was entirely different from any other room they had entered in that house: and not in the least like a den, or even like a study. The lamps were modern, efficient, adequate, and decorative. The furniture was soft and comfortable. The railway blight (as Margaret regarded it) seemed totally absent. As Roper had said, there was an excellent fire in a modern grate surrounded by unexciting but not disagreeable Dutch tiles. This seemed the true drawing-room of the house.

'What a lovely lounge!' cried Mimi. 'Looks like a woman in the house at last. Why couldn't we come in here before?' Her rapidly increasing command of the situation seemed to Margaret almost strident.

'I thought the occasion called for more formality.'

'Dog in the manger, if you ask me.' Mimi fell upon a sofa, extending her trousered legs. 'Pour out, Margaret, will you?'

Margaret, conscious that whereas Mimi ought to be appearing in a bad light, yet in fact it was she, Margaret, who, however unjustly, was doing so, repeated with the tea the office she had already performed with the coffee. Roper, who had placed the tray on a small table next to an armchair in which Margaret proceeded to seat herself beside the fire, carried one of the big full cups to Mimi. He poured her milk with protective intimacy and seemed to find one of her obvious jokes about the quantity of sugar she required intoxicatingly funny. He moved rather well, Margaret thought. Mimi, moreover, had been right about his voice. His remarks, however, though almost never about himself, seemed mostly, in the light of that fact, remarkably self-centred. It would be dreadful to have to listen to them all one's life.

Suddenly he was bearing cake. Neither of the women saw where it came from but, when it appeared, both found they still had appetites. It tasted of vanilla and was choked with candied peel.

In the kitchen Margaret had noticed that despite the late hour the traffic on the railway had seemed to be positively increasing; but in the present small room the noise was much muffled, the line being on the other side of the house. None the less, frequent trains were still to be heard.

'Why are there so many trains? It must be nearly midnight.'

'Long past, dear,' interjected Mimi, the time-keeper. The fact seemed to give her a particular happiness.

'I see you're not used to living by a railway,' said Roper. 'Many classes of traffic are kept off the tracks during ordinary travelling hours. What you hear going by now are the loads you don't see when the stations are open. A railway is like an iceberg, you know: very little of its working is visible to the casual onlooker.'

'Not visible, perhaps. But certainly audible.'

'The noise does not disturb you?'

'No, of course not. But does it really go on day and night?'

'Certainly. Day and night. At least on important main lines, such as this is.'

'I suppose you've long ceased to notice it?'

'I notice when it's not there. If a single train is missing from its time, I become quite upset. Even if it happens when I'm asleep.'

'But surely only the passenger trains have time-tables?'

'My dear Margaret, every single train is in a time-table. Every local goods, every light engine movement. Only not, of course, in the time-table you buy for sixpence at the Enquiry Office. Only a small fraction of all the train movements are in that. Even the man behind the counter knows virtually nothing of the rest.'

'Only Wendley knows the whole works,' said Mimi from the sofa.

The others were sitting one at each side of the fire in front of which she lay and had been talking along the length of her body. Margaret had realised that this was the first time Roper had used her Christian name. It seemed hours ago that he had called Mimi by hers. Suddenly, looking at Mimi sprawling in her trousers and tight high-necked sweater, Margaret saw the point, clearer than in any book: Mimi was physically attractive; she herself in all probability was not. And nothing else in all life, in all the world, really counted. Nothing, nothing. Being cleverer; on the whole (as she thought) kinder; being more refined; the daughter of a Lord: such things were the dust beneath Mimi's chariot wheels, items in the list of life's innumerable unwantable impedimenta. Margaret stuck out her legs unbecomingly.

'Can I have another cup of tea?' said Mimi. Her small round head was certainly engaging.

'There you are,' said Margaret. 'Now will you both forgive me if I go to bed? I think I could do with some sleep after my soaking.'

'I'm a beast,' cried Mimi, warmly sympathetic. 'Is there anything I can do? What about a hot water bottle, Wendley? Margaret is always as helpless as a butterfly. I have to look after her.' She was certainly rather sweet too.

'Not a hot water bottle, please,' replied Margaret. 'They're not in season yet. I'll be all right, Mimi. See you later. Good night.'

Between sympathy and the desire to get her out of the room, Margaret thought on her way upstairs, Mimi had absolutely no conflict whatever; she merely took her emotions in turn, getting the most out of all of them, and no doubt giving the most also.

This time there was no vague figure which crept back from the stairs: or possibly it was that Margaret's thoughts attended a different will-o'-the-wisp. Immediately she entered the bedroom, she noticed that the promised second bed had arrived, as lean and frugal as the first. In the long room the two beds had been set far apart. Margaret was unable to be sure whether the second bed had or had not been there when she had last entered the room.

Her mind still darting and plunging about the scene downstairs, she selected the bed which stood furthest from the door. At that moment Mimi seemed to her in no particular need of consideration. Margaret dashed off her clothes in the clammy atmosphere, dropping the garments with unwonted carelessness upon one of the two dark, thin-legged chairs; then, as a train pounded past, rattling the small barred windows at each end of the room and causing the curtains to shake apart, letting in the infernal glare outside, she climbed into her pyjamas and into the small, tight bed. She now realised for the first time that there were no sheets, but only clinging blankets. To put out the single oil lamp was more than her courage or the cold permitted. She buttoned her jacket to the top and wished it had long sleeves. It had been only an absurd dignity, a preposterous aggression, which had led her to reject a hot water bottle.

She was quite unable to sleep. Her mind had set up a devil's dance which would not subside for hours at the best. The bed was the first really uncomfortable one in which Margaret had ever slept: it was so narrow that blankets of normal size could be and were tucked in so far that they overlapped beneath the occupant, interlocking to bind her in; so narrow also that the cheap hard springs of the wire framework gave not at all beneath the would-be sleeper's weight; and the mattress was inadequate to blur a diamond pattern of hard metallic ridges. Although she liked by day to wear garments fitting closely at the throat, Margaret found that the same sensation in bed, however much necessitated by the temperature, amounted to suffocation. Nor had she ever been able, since first she could remember, to sleep with a light in the room. Above all, there were the trains: not so much the periodical thunder rollings, she found, as the apparently lengthening intervals of waiting for them. Downstairs the trains had seemed to become more and more frequent; here they seemed to become slowly sparser. It was probably, Margaret reflected, a consequence of the slowness with which time is said to pass for those seeking sleep. Or perhaps Wendley Roper would have an answer in terms of graphicstatics or inner family knowledge. The ultimate effect was as if the train service were something subjective in Margaret's head, like the large defined shapes which obstruct the vision of the sufferer from migraine. 'No sleep like this,' said Margaret to herself, articulating with a clarity which made the words seem spoken by another.

She forced herself from the rigid blankets, felt-like though far from warm, opened the neck of her pyjama jacket, and extinguished the light, which died on the lightest breath. What on earth was Mimi doing? she wondered with schoolgirl irritation.

Immediately she had groped into the pitch-dark bed, a train which seemed of an entirely new construction went past. This time there was no blasting of steam and thundering or grinding of wheels: only a single sustained rather high-pitched rattling; metallic, inhuman, hollow. The new train appeared to be descending the bank, but Margaret for the first time could not be sure. The sound frightened Margaret badly. 'It's a hospital train,' her mother had said to her long ago on an occasion of which Margaret had forgotten all details except that they were horrible. 'It's full of wounded soldiers.'

In a paroxysm of terror, as this agony of her childhood blasted through her adult life, Margaret must have passed into sleep, or at least unconsciousness. For the next event could only have been a dream of hallucination. The room seemed to be filling with colourless light. Though even now this light was extremely dim, the process of its first appearance and increase seemed to have been going on for a very long time. As she realised this, another part of Margaret's mind remembered that it could none the less have been only a matter of minutes. She struggled to make consistent the consciousness of the nearly endless with the consciousness of the precisely brief. The light seemed, moreover, the exact visual counterpart of the noise she had heard made by the new train. Then Margaret became aware of something very horrible indeed: it began with the upturned dead face of an old woman, colourless with the exact colourlessness of the colourless light; and it ended with the old woman's crumpled shape occultly made visible hanging above the trap-door in the corner of Margaret's compartment-shaped room. Up in the attic old Miss Roper had hanged herself, her grey hair so twisted and meshed as itself to suggest the suffocating agent.

Margaret's hands went in terror to her own bare throat. Then the door of the room opened, and someone stood inside it bearing a light.

'I don't think you heard me knock.'

As when she and Mimi had arrived she had noticed in Roper's first words the echo of the man at the Guest House, so now was another echo – of Beech's cool apology for that bedroom contretemps which had so fired Mimi's wrath. To Margaret it was as if a nightmare had reached that not uncommon point at which the sufferer, though not yet awake, not yet out of the dream, yet becomes aware that a dream it is. Then all was deep nightmare once more, as Margaret recalled the shadow woman on the stairs, and perceived that the same woman was now in the room with her.

Margaret broke down. Still clutching her throat, she cried repeatedly in a shrill but not loud voice. 'Go away. Go away. Go away. Go away.' It was again like her childhood.

The strange woman approached and, setting down the lamp, began to shake her by the shoulders. At once Margaret seemed to know that, whoever else she was, she was not the dead Miss Roper; and that was all which seemed to matter. She stopped wauling like a terror-struck child: then saw that the hand still on one of her shoulders wore a dull coal-black ring; and, looking up, that the face above her and the thick black hair were Beech's, as had been that indifferently apologetic voice. Nightmare stormed forward yet again; but this time only for an adult speck of time. For Margaret seemed now to have no doubt whatever that Beech was indeed a woman.

'Where's your friend?'

'I left her downstairs. I came up to bed early.'

'Early?'

'What's the time? I have no watch.'

'It's half-past three.'

The equivocal situation returned to life in Margaret's mind in every detail, as when stage lights are turned on simultaneously.

'What business is it of yours? Who are you?'

'Who do you think I am?'

'I thought you were the manservant.'

'I looked after old Miss Roper. Until she died.'

'Did that mean you had to dress like a man?' The woman now appeared to be wearing a dark grey coat and skirt and a white blouse.

'Wendley could hardly live alone in the house with a woman he wasn't married to. Someone he had no intention of marrying.'

'Why haven't you left, then?'

'After what happened to Miss Roper?'

'What did you do to Miss Roper?' Margaret spoke very low but quite steadily. All feeling was dead in her, save, far below the surface, a flickering jealousy of Mimi, a death-wish sympathy with the murdering stranger beside her. So that Margaret was able to add, steadily as before, 'Miss Roper was mad, wasn't she?'

'Certainly not. Why do you say that?'

'Her father preventing her marrying. The bars on the windows.'

'You can be crossed in love without going mad, you know. And madhouse windows are not the only ones with bars.' The large white hand with the black ring on the engagement finger had continued all this time to rest on Margaret's shoulder. Now with a sharp movement it was withdrawn.

'So this was simply a prison? Why? What had Miss Roper done?'

'Something to do with the railway. Some secret she had from the old man and wouldn't tell Wendley. I never asked for details. I was in love. You know what that means as well as I do.'

'What sort of secret? And why did it have to be a secret?'

'I don't know what sort of secret. I don't care now. She wanted to keep it secret from Wendley because she knew what he would do with it. She spent all her time trying to tell other people.'

'That's why...' Margaret was about to say 'that's why she waved', then stopped herself. '*What* would Wendley have done with it?'

'Your friend should have some idea of that by this time.' This unexpected remark was delivered in a tone of deepest venom.

'What do you mean? Where is Mimi?' Then a sudden hysteria swept over her. 'I'm going to find Mimi.' She struggled out of the crib-like bed, bruising herself badly on the ironwork. The trains seemed to have long ceased and everything was horribly quiet in the Quiet Valley.

The woman, approaching the cheap little bedroom chair on which Margaret's clothes lay tumbled where she had dropped them, picked up Margaret's tie, and held it between her two hands twelve inches or so apart.

In the negligible light of one oil lamp there began a slow chase down the long narrow room.

'You're not on his side really,' cried Margaret, everything gone. 'You know what's happening downstairs.'

The woman made no answer, but slightly decreased the distance between her hands. Margaret perceived how foolish had been her error in deliberately selecting the bed furthest from the door. None the less, a certain amount of evasion, as in a childhood game of 'Touch', was possible before she found herself being forced near the end wall, being corralled almost beneath the trap-door in the ceiling above. If only she could have reached the other door, the door of the room! Much would then have been possible.

As they arrived at the corner beneath the trap, Margaret's heel struck Mimi's open rucksack, dropped there by its casual owner, hitherto forgotten or unnoticed by Margaret, and concealed by the dim light. Margaret stooped.

Three seconds later her adversary was lying back downwards on the floor, bleeding darkly and excessively in the gloom, Mimi's robust camping knife through her rather thick white throat. 'Comes from Sweden, dear,' Mimi had said. 'Not allowed to sell them here.'

It did not take Margaret long, plunging into the pockets in the dead woman's jacket, to find Beech's bunch of keys. This was fortunate, as the scream of the murdered woman, breaking into the course of events below, was followed by running footsteps on the murky stairs. The agile Mimi burst into the room crying, 'Lock it. For God's sake lock it'; and Margaret had raced the length of the Rafters Room and locked it before Wendley Roper, heavy and unused to exercise, had arrived at the landing outside. The large key turned in the expensive, efficient lock with a grinding snap he could not have mistaken. The railway hotel door was enormously thick, a beautiful piece of joinery. Margaret waited, her body drooping forward, for Roper to begin his onslaught. But it was a job for an axe, and nothing whatever happened; neither blows on the door, nor a voice, nor even retreating footsteps.

Mimi, ignorant that the room had a third occupant, was seated on the side of her bed with her hands distending her trousers' pockets. She was panting slightly, but her hair was habitually cut too short ever to show much disorder. Margaret had previously thought her manner strident; it was now beyond bearing. She began to blow out a stream of curses, particularly horrible in the presence of the dead woman.

'Mimi, my dear,' said Margaret gently. 'What are we going to do?' Still in her pyjamas, she was shivering spasmodically.

Mimi, keeping her hands in her pockets, looked round at her. 'Catch the first departure for hell, I should say.'

Though she was not weeping, there was something unbearably desolate about her. Margaret wanted to comfort her: Mimi's experiences had been unimaginably worse even than her own. She put her cold arms round Mimi's stiff hard body; then tried to drag Mimi's hands from her pockets in order to take them in her own. Mimi, though offering no help, did not strongly resist. As Margaret dragged at her wrists, one of her own hands

round each, a queer little trickle fell to the floor on each side of her. Mimi's pockets were tightly stuffed with railway tickets.

Dropping Mimi's wrists, Margaret picked up one of the tickets and read it by the light of the strange woman's lamp: 'Diamond Jubilee Special. Pudsley to Hassell-wicket. Third Class. Excursion 2s. 11d God Save Our Queen.' Mimi's fists were clenched round variegated little bundles of pasteboard rectangles.

It was impossible to tell her about the dead woman.

'I'm going to dress. Then we'll get out.' Margaret began to drag on the clothes she had worn for dinner. She buttoned the collar of her shirt, warm and welcome about her neck. She looked for her tie, and could just see it in one hand of the dead woman as she lay compact on the floor at the end of the room behind Mimi's back.

'I'll pack our rucksacks.' Fully dressed, Margaret felt more valiant and less vulnerable. She groped at the feet of the corpse for Mimi's rucksack and assembled the scattered contents. But, though feeling the omission to be folly, she did not go back for Mimi's knife. In the end, she had packed both rucksacks and was carefully fastening the straps. Mimi had apparently emptied her pockets of tickets, leaving four small heaps on the dark carpet, one from each fist, one from each pocket; and was now sitting silent and apparently relaxed, but making no effort to help Margaret.

'Are you ready? We must plan.'

Mimi gazed up at her. Then she said quietly, 'There's nowhere for us to go now.' With the slightest of gestures she appeared to indicate the four heaps of tickets.

No argument that Margaret used would induce Mimi to make the least effort. She just sat on the bed saying that they were prisoners and there was nothing they could do.

Feeling that Mimi's reason might have been affected, though of this there was no sign, Margaret began to contemplate the dreadful extremity of trying

to escape alone. But apart from the additional perils to body and spirit (there was no knowing that Roper was not standing outside the door), she felt that it would be impossible for her to leave Mimi alone to what might befall. She set down her rucksack on the floor beside Mimi's. When filled, she always found it heavy to hold for long.

'Very well. We'll wait till it's light. It should be quite soon.'

Mimi said nothing. Looking at her, Margaret saw that for the first time she was weeping. Margaret once more put her arms round her now soft body, and the two women tenderly kissed. They came from very different environments and it was the first time they had ever done so.

The desperate idea entered Margaret's mind that help might be obtained. Surely there must be visitors to the house of some kind sometimes; and neither she nor Mimi was a powerless old woman. Margaret's eyes unintendingly went to the knife in the victim's throat.

For a long time the two women sat close together saying little.

Margaret had not for hours given a thought to the railway outside. Since that strange and dream-like new train, nothing had passed. Then, from the very far distance, came the airy ghost of an engine whistle: utterly impersonal at that hour and place, but, to Margaret, filled with promise.

She rose and drew back the curtains from one of the queer barred windows.

'Look! It's dawn.'

A girdle of light was slowly edging over the horizon, offering a fine day to come, unusual in such mountainous country. Margaret, aflame for action, looked quickly about the room. She herself was wearing colours unlikely to stand out in the yet faint light. Mimi's grey was hardly more helpful. There was only one thing to be done. Leaping across the room, Margaret ripped a large piece of material from the dead woman's white blouse patched with blood. Then as in the growing radiance Mimi turned and for the first time saw the body. Margaret, throwing up the narrow window, waved confidently to the workmen's train which was approaching.

Your Tiny Hand Is Frozen (1953)

It was on the third night that the trouble with the telephone started. Edmund St. Jude had been a light sleeper for years; but the previous day had been occupied with steady and unwonted domestic tasks, and when the telephone began to ring he was slumbering heavily and dreaming vividly. For some time, indeed, it was in this dream that the bell rang: then he found that he was sitting crouched in bed, shuddering a little, and totally uncertain how far the dream had ended. Moonlight drifted in through the glass mansard of the studio north light, but the telephone, being on a low table immediately beneath the sill, was in darkness. In the absence of other sounds to muffle or compete, the peals of the bell were thrown back and forth from wall to wall, icy and imperative.

Clutching his personality, jeopardised by the dream, about him, Edmund resolved not to answer. At that hour it could only be a wrong number... or a friend of Teddie's, he suddenly thought. The bell continued to ring. What time was it? His beautiful hunter, symbol of his former life, lay on a chair by the bed. It was twenty-five minutes past five. That the caller could be for Teddie seemed improbable. The bell continued to ring.

In the end, Edmund, who was an amiable man, always yielded to importunity. He crawled out into the autumnal November moonlight and lifted the instrument from its black bed. His aunt, with whom he had previously resided for a number of years, had contrived to retain an instrument of the earlier candlestick pattern; to which Edmund's reflexes were accordingly accustomed, especially in the middle of the night. He fumbled slightly, almost dropping this newer contraption. Now the silence was as disconcerting as the former noise.

'Hullo.'

There was no answering sound of any kind.

'Hullo.'

After a silence of seconds, there was a loud sharp click. It was as if the caller had counted one, two, three, and then, as if by premeditation, rung off.

'Hullo,' said Edmund futilely. But nothing happened. It was not an hour for the operator forthwith to ask what number he wanted.

Edmund replaced the telephone and sped back to bed. He slept again, but now lightly and brokenly, as he usually did.

The episode amounted to little, and Edmund, had he been permitted, would probably soon have forgotten it, especially among the many other nuisances of which his new life seemed largely composed. But during the next few weeks the incident was repeated again and again. Almost always it happened if not during the hours of daylight, which now were daily shrinking, then at least during the hours when Edmund was up and about; although there were further night alarms on at least two occasions.

One of these night calls was especially curious. The telephone rang almost immediately after Edmund had got into bed. Suspecting, with a sinking of his already low spirits, that it was one of the unaccountable calls, but knowing that for him there was no escape in letting the bell go on ringing (two minutes and fifty seconds had proved his maximum period of endurance to date, counted out upon the second-hand of his hunter), he at once switched on the weak bedside light, rose, and answered.

'Hullo.'

There was the usual silence.

'Hullo.'

Not for the first time, he was permitted to speak thrice.

'Hullo.'

There came the click; and then a sound which was new. Edmund heard it before he put back the telephone, but that it came after and not before the

dismissive click he was sure. It was a sound which could be nothing but a light short laugh. It seemed to mock his certainly derisory plight. It upset him very much. But no such quirk, additional to the mischief of the calls themselves, occurred again.

There appeared no method or regularity about the calls. Several days would pass without one; then there would be three in twenty-four hours. The apparent chanciness of the calls played its part in for long dissuading Edmund, who always delayed such approaches, from communicating with the Exchange. He was also deterred by the extreme rarity of his other calls, received or initiated. He felt that this put him in a weak position to complain, and would make his complaint seem ridiculous. The whole telephone installation was only a survival from Teddie's occupancy, and it was one of several with which he would have dispensed.

Another was a habit which seemed common to many of Teddie's friends of calling without previous announcement. The callers consisted of rather commonplace young women, obviously in great need of a good gossip, and of well-set-up young men with the wrong kind of haircut and few overt stigmata of imagination. Edmund, who could afford few friends of his own, had known few of Teddie's. He was now much surprised by the implications with regard to Teddie's nature and character which these stray visitors conveyed. As he was engaged to marry Teddie, he was also somewhat concerned.

On one occasion, when Edmund was standing at the studio door trying to ward off a large youth who said his name was Toby, the telephone rang. It proved to be one of the mysterious calls, but by the time Edmund had heard the usual click and had replaced the instrument, he perceived that his visitor had followed him into the studio.

'Nothing wrong, I hope?'

With each successive call, Edmund was becoming fractionally more irritated, and also perturbed; so that the young man's question was as unwelcome as his presence.

'Nothing,' said Edmund stonily. Then he thought. He was beginning to need a confidant. 'Nothing *wrong*,' he continued. 'But perhaps something unusual. The telephone rings. I answer it. And then the person at the other end rings off. That's all. But it happens again and again.'

'Nothing unusual about that,' said Toby, failing to grasp the essence of the matter. 'We all get it.' His manner was insensitive and insufferable. 'Now tell me, St. Jude.' He was also over-familiar. 'How long has Teddie had T.B.? I never knew she had it at all.'

'No one knew,' replied Edmund. 'But I'm sorry. I was working. I must get on, you know. I'll tell Teddie you called.'

'OK.' Toby had evidently given Edmund up. He shrugged his bulging shoulders and departed without further comment. Edmund had to shut the door behind him.

Annoyance with Toby seemed to imbue Edmund with the small increment of aggression required for him to complain to the Exchange.

'It must have happened more than thirty times now,' he concluded. 'I mean since I arrived here, about three weeks ago.'

'Are you the subscriber?' asked the Exchange.

'No, Miss Taylor-Smith's the subscriber. But I'm her subtenant.'

'Have we been notified?'

'I don't think so. The arrangement's only temporary.'

'Please send us full particulars or we may have to discontinue the service.'

'I'll write to you. But these calls –'

'I'm sorry, but if you don't tell us when there's a new subscriber –'

'That's nothing to do with it.'

'If you'll complete a new Application Form, we'll go into the matter further.'

*

The odd thing was that after that the calls ceased. Edmund never wrote to the Exchange. His inclination was to ask for the telephone to be removed from the studio as soon as possible, but he reflected that this might be unfair to Teddie, as it was understood that telephones were by most people both sought after and hard to obtain, and Teddie probably needed one in order that she might communicate with the parents of her sitters. So Edmund did nothing. None the less the call which came when Toby was there was the last unexplained call Edmund received for a long time.

It was when Christmas approached that the climate of unsuccess in which Edmund nowadays passed too much of his life became annually most intolerable. Every year since the sale of the family's ancient manors and estates had so nearly extinguished his income, he had participated in his aunt's sober Christmas celebrations, if only because she so clearly counted upon him to do so. Now, however, he seemed to have a measure of choice. It was unfortunate that the family débâcle and his past feeling of obligation to his aunt had combined to terminate the previous modest influx of Christmas invitations; but at least he once more had premises where, to the extent his means permitted, he himself could offer hospitality.

Not that the position was unequivocal. He was, after all, only a superior caretaker, with love the consideration in place of cash; and the atmosphere of the studio remained Teddie's entirely. He looked carefully round, before making a list of friends who might join him for Christmas Dinner, bringing, if possible, some festive contributions of their own. Lacking the presence of Teddie to indicate that they were but stock-in-trade (the expression was hers), the pictures of children which covered all the walls made a scheme of decoration that was oppressively insipid. Conspicuously embarrassing were the two biggest works: one a much enlarged reproduction of Reynolds's *The Age of Innocence,* specially photoprinted with the maximum fidelity accessible to science, and intended both as lure to parents and as reassurance that Teddie's muse had strict principles; the other Teddie's own *Children of Mr and Mrs Preston Brook.* This work had been shown, upon Mr Brook's instructions, at a number of exhibitions; after which Mr Brook,

a successful manufacturer of vegetable sundries, had so far failed to take possession of his property. The picture hung above the electric heater, and still bore a name-plate, with 'Edwina Taylor-Smith M.S.P.C.' in prominent capitals. Edmund could still hear Teddie saying, 'Edwina. It's a noise like a slowly squeaking wheel.'

Twenty-five minutes later Edmund had made little progress with his list. Most of his acquaintances were too rich, too distant, or too obviously provided already with better fare than his. Almost all were married; commonly to spouses who were either unknown or unsuitable. With many he had lost all touch. There were three or four men who were possible, being generally situated much as he was; but Edmund was shocked and disheartened by the specific demonstration that women, other than Teddie, had almost disappeared from his life. None the less a start had to be made if he was not to spend Christmas in solitude. Edmund lifted the telephone and dialled the number of his friend Tadpole, who had been at Oriel with him.

He could hear the bell begin to ring immediately. It continued ringing. Reluctant to acknowledge the evaporation of his first essay, he allowed it to ring long after the time had expired when his friend, who lived in chambers, could be expected to answer. He began to think of the exigent ringing which had marked the unexplained calls he himself had been receiving until about a month before; when the noise stopped and a voice spoke. By then the rhythmic thrumming of the bell in his ear had slightly hypnotised Edmund, and the voice made him start. Still, it seemed to him an unknown voice. And it said something quite unintelligible to him.

'I beg your pardon?'

Again the voice said something unintelligible, but this time longer. Edmund could hear only a rather high-pitched gabbling.

'I wanted to speak to Mr Pusey. Is he in?'

The reply seemed to be two short, sharp sentences, but Edmund could not distinguish a single word. It occurred to him even that the sounds might not be vocal, but might come from the telephone system itself.

'I'd better ring off and try again,' said Edmund, unsure that he was not merely speaking to himself.

There was a much softer gabbling, which diminished into silence.

Edmund rang off.

After a minute or two, he tried again. This time the bell simply rang, and went on ringing. Palpably though depressingly, Tadpole was out.

Edmund made three more calls. One of his friends was spending Christmas in Paris; one would have to let him know later (Edmund was certain that he was hoping for something better to offer itself); and one, like Tadpole, did not reply. Edmund decided to write off to the remaining names on his list. If only he could write, 'Evelyn Laye will be there, so we'll be sure of some good talk!'

*

During the following seven days, Edmund used the telephone more than was his wont. He began to ring up everyone he had met, however casually, during the previous year. Probably because his contact with them had been so casual, none of them seemed to want to spend Christmas with him. In the course of one of these, usually brief, calls, the somewhat uneasy conversation was at one point intruded upon by a repetition in the background of the indistinct gabbling talk.

'Can you hear that sound?' asked Edmund, interrupting his acquaintance's meagre trickle of explanation.

'What sound, old boy?'

'Like someone talking gibberish.'

'Some woman on a cross-line, I expect.'

'You think it's a woman?'

'How do I know, old boy? But look here, as I was saying, Nell and I – but of course, you've not met Nell – we always go to stay with her people up in Galloway –'

By the end of the week, his friend who had wavered decided against him. Something better had duly appeared. Of those Edmund had written to, one had replied pleading a previous commitment by return of post. The others had not replied at all. Upon Edmund descended a colourless suffocating fog of loneliness.

*

Suddenly, in his despair, Edmund thought of Queenie. Queenie was a girl of whom he had seen much when, twenty years before, he had first lived in London. Even at that period, though fortified with a private income which sufficed, he had been commonly unsuccessful in reaching the hearts of the girls who really appealed to him; and in retrospect he perceived that Queenie had much in common with Teddie. He had been fond of her, and she had been more than fond of him. In those days Edmund's remarkable linguistic aptitude had served to make smooth the highways of the continent, instead of as now merely bringing him an undependable stipend as a translator; and Queenie had travelled many of the highways with him. She was well formed, and had been carefully nurtured (her baptismal name was Estelle; Queenie had attached itself to her at Newnham, reflection, perhaps, of something within her); and Edmund might well in the end have married her, had not ruin supervened. In fact she had married a man much older than herself, who had almost immediately afterwards fallen into invalidism. During the previous summer, in Victoria Street, Edmund had walked into an old friend of Queenie's named Sefton, a civil servant. They had not met for many years, and their only common subject of conversation was Queenie. Sefton told Edmund that Queenie's husband was now dead, and Edmund wrote down her new address and telephone number.

That number he now dialled for the first time.

'Who is it?' There had been no sound of ringing. The enquiry seemed to come immediately Edmund had dialled the last figure. The voice sounded warm and eager. It surpassed Edmund's recollection.

'You'll be surprised. It's Edmund. How are you, Queenie?'

'Edmund! Edmund St. Jude?' It was delightful. There was real joy in her voice.

'I am glad you sound pleased. I wasn't sure...'

'You don't know how lonely I've been. No one knows.' Her voice had a slight throb in it which was charming, and also new.

Edmund's own recent experience made it impossible for him to offer easy commiseration. Instead he offered specific aid. 'I want you to dine with me on Christmas Day.'

'Are you giving a party?'

'I meant to originally. But I've thought better of it. Just the two of us, Queenie. If you will.'

She said nothing. Edmund could hear a light intermittent humming on the wire, like the sound of a very distant multitude. He spoke again. 'Please come, Queenie. I'm living in a friend's studio, and –'

She had apparently been gathering resolution, because now she burst out, 'I'm not Queenie.'

Edmund's heart would have fallen further than it did, had it not already premonished him.

'Then I should certainly apologise.'

'For asking me to Christmas Dinner?'

'Yes.'

'To dinner, perhaps. Surely *Christmas* Dinner's entirely different?'

The implication was perhaps too blatant, but Edmund was desperate, and, blatant or not, she sounded pleasant.

'In that case, will you come? Perhaps you would accompany Queenie, if she's not otherwise engaged?'

'Queenie *is* otherwise engaged.'

'Oh.' Edmund was not sure whether to feel disappointed. 'In that case –'

'I'd love to. But I can't.'

'Are you engaged too?'

'Not engaged. I just can't.' There was something a little hysterical about the way she made this plain statement. The humming sound had stopped. No less hysterically she added, 'I'm very sorry... Please don't ring off.'

'I'm sorry too,' said Edmund.

'Don't ring off,' she said again. 'I really am sorry.'

'Prove it by coming some other time,' suggested Edmund. 'What about tomorrow night?'

'You've never seen me. You don't know what I look like.'

'I can hear you,' replied Edmund, smiling into the telephone. 'Your voice speaks for you.' He hoped it did.

She made no reply, but suddenly began to sob. There was no doubt about it. Edmund could hear each separate gulping intake of breath. It seemed an unusually good line.

'Well, come some time,' said Edmund, embarrassed and slightly raising his voice.

'I may never be able to.'

It seemed unwise to probe. But Edmund thought that she would continue and explain.

'You've been so kind to me. May I ring you up again?'

'Of course.' Edmund gave her his number, but she seemed too overwrought particularly to take note of it.

'You'll really let me?' Her gratitude was embarrassing, but somehow not ridiculous.

'I might even ring *you*,' Edmund said gallantly.

'No. Just let *me*.'

'What about Christmas Day?'

'Oh *yes*.' She sounded like a schoolgirl.

The humming had resumed.

'And what about Queenie?'

She said something which he could not distinguish.

'Sorry. This humming noise.'

It was now quite loud. He realised that she was gone.

*

The afternoon post brought a still further rejection of Edmund's hospitality. Face to face with the unpleasing prospect of spending Christmas Day entirely alone, he again dialled the number which Sefton had given him. He reflected that Queenie might have returned by now, or that he might at least find out where she was from her curious friend. This time the bell began to ring at once. It continued to ring. Edmund let it ring for an interminable time before he capitulated. Then he rang up Sefton at his Ministry.

'I haven't actually seen her myself since her husband became so bad. In fact I can't have seen her for more than three years. To tell you the truth, I only

got her address off another mutual friend. I meant to look her up, but you know what happens.'

'She doesn't answer the telephone.'

'Christmas, I expect. You know what it is. Sorry I can't help, but if you'll excuse me, I must go to a meeting.'

Civil servants at least have 'meetings', thought Edmund. The pink and blue children on the walls smiled at his plight, winsomely, cheekily, plethorically, according to character. Edmund settled to translating the first chapter of a Dutch work on the technological revolution of our time.

*

Christmas Day was the first of the many days which Edmund spent waiting for the telephone to ring. The morning post had brought a woolly scarf from his aunt (she had gone to the trouble of procuring one in his college colours), two Christmas cards, and a cablegram from Teddie:LOVELY XMAS HERE ALL LAID ON STOP HAPPIEST GREETINGS DARLING STOP CAN'T WAIT FOR CHRISTMAS NEXT YEAR. After that there was nothing except to attend upon the horrid little bell.

The fact that Edmund was far from sure that it would ring at all made the waiting much worse. He had several times attempted to telephone Queenie's number, but there was never a reply. The worst thing of all was the dreary knowledge that he who had dined tête-à-tête with Fritzi Massary, and been accounted a man of insight and judgement in certain high affairs, was now wholly preoccupied with and dependent upon the favours of an unknown with whom he had upon one single occasion exchanged some unintended remarks upon the telephone. He was fond of Teddie, but no more; and the thousands of miles which separated her from him tended also, to his real regret, to obliterate her as a living image in his thoughts. The unrest which the voice on the telephone had certainly created within him seemed to prove both the tenuousness of poor Teddie's hold on him and the general aridity of his days. It was absurd and out of proportion, but certainly true that the unknown, and the doubt whether he would hear from her again, had affected his nerves and further diminished his already sketchy appetite. On

Christmas Day systematic translation seemed impossible. Edmund found it difficult to settle to occupation of any kind, and constantly caught his attention wandering into the evolution of persuasive verbal gambits. Before it was time for lunch, he was wondering whether his Christmas malaise would have been any worse if he had never heard from her at all.

She telephoned just when the fleeting and dreamlike December day had finally subsided into darkness. Although their conversation was disturbed by various cracklings and rumblings on the line, Edmund was astonished to notice, when it was over, that it had continued for at least half an hour. During this period, Edmund and she seemed to discover several points of sympathy. For example, when she said that her name was Nera Condamine, Edmund became certain that she belonged to the ancient and distinguished family of that name, and that she had descended in the world as he had. She took a critical and informed but appreciative interest in his remarks upon the eighteenth-century English poets, about whom he was an authority, and who entered the conversation when he quoted topically from Thomson's 'The Seasons'. Above all, Edmund felt, they had loneliness in common: each of them (he deprecatingly, she eagerly) seemed to throw out feelers of interrogation at which the other clutched. Only questions which were direct and personal she refused to answer: where she lived or why she must remain inaccessible. At the first sign of persistence on Edmund's part, she became hysterical.

'Please don't ask me, Please. Please.'

'Naturally I understand if you'd rather not tell me. I only thought –'

'I'll have to ring off if you ask me.'

'Then I'll certainly not ask you.'

In the end, however, she did let fall one minor fact.

'Of course I understand that very well,' she said. 'Because I'm a painter.'

'Do I know your work?' asked Edmund. All the children on the walls looked interrogative.

'I only paint for myself. There used to be others, but now there's only me.' The telephone croaked in mournful confirmation. Edmund dared not ask what had happened to the others.

By the end of their talk, in fact, a curious change had taken place. Originally it had been Nera, as Edmund at her request had begun to call her, who had repeatedly besought him not to ring off; now the fear lest they stop talking seemed to be primarily his. He perceived the change before he could think about it and account for it. On the whole, by the end of their talk, he was delighted with her.

'I'm glad we have made one another's acquaintance.' (He had almost said 'found one another'.) 'You have transformed Christmas Day for me.'

'We have a lot to say yet,' she replied lightly. 'But we've both time to burn.'

There was a click; without a farewell she was gone; and the Exchange was speaking: 'What number do you want?'

'That same number again,' replied Edmund with unusual resourcefulness.

'What number was it?' asked the Exchange, not without petulance.

'I'm afraid I don't know. Can't you please trace it? I'd be most obliged if you could.'

'Sorry you've been troubled,' replied the Exchange.

Edmund looked at the electric clock, then sat for a long time staring at the small square electric heater. Thinking it over, he was unable to determine very clearly what indeed they had said to each other which had consumed so much time. There had been the eighteenth-century English poets (it was remarkable indeed to make a casual acquaintance who knew Addison's *Cato*); but otherwise there seemed to have been little but an interchange of remarks which barely amounted to conversation, because his preoccupation had been curiosity, hers a seemingly almost desperate reaching out for a response, for friendship. Edmund was not one of the many men whose response to an emotional need is inversely proportionate to the degree of

that need. On the contrary, he tended by temperament to fall in with any demand made upon him. For this among other reasons, he now felt that, despite the queer circumstances, a new and important factor had entered his life. He had certainly been swept and ready...

At this time the oddness of the circumstances seemed to Edmund to come within the probable boundaries of such familiar concepts as 'discretion', 'gaining time', or even 'coquetry'. It was not until a later call that Nera's mysterious elusiveness began significantly to perturb him. Because during this particular conversation, in the course of which she took a clearer initiative than before, she stated, most unmistakably, that she loved him; and he, instead of proceeding as if he thought her remark was meant partly or mainly in jest, replied almost seriously, 'I think I love you too.' And when after that, and after sundry strange endearments between these lovers who had never set eyes upon one another and who often found themselves at cross purposes on the telephone, she still refused to say where she lived, Edmund was naturally aghast. He was able to notice, however, that whereas previously his more direct approaches had made her hysterical, she now refused him quite tranquilly.

'Am I, then, never to see you?' he cried.

'I haven't said that.'

'But when?'

'Wait until you can't live without me.'

Edmund checked himself from replying to that.

'Can I ring you?'

'No. No. No. But I'll ring you.'

'When?'

'Whenever I can, darling. Trust me.'

After that there was nothing for Edmund to do but translate from the Dutch, buy his food, and wait for the telephone. The call which had brought about such a striking alteration in the terms of his association with Nera had taken place on the Sunday after Christmas, but on Christmas Day she had not forewarned him, and now she had virtually stated her inability in future ever to do so. None the less, Edmund had something of emotional content to think about and to fill his life: for despairing inertia he had substituted dreams of desire; and for listlessness, eager and unresting expectancy. But there was something else. Edmund could never forget that he had not looked upon the being who so agitated his mind and heart; and never was able altogether to disregard the peril possibly implicit in her reluctance to let him look upon her. Simple sameness of days, therefore, had now for him been replaced by a difficult and intense inner combat.

When next he heard from Nera, however, she so enchanted him with tender words and a previously undisclosed richness of expression that the conflict within him began thereafter to abate, and the telephone more and more to become a simple instrument of bliss, like the soup kitchen to the outcast, or the syringe to the drug-addict. When the first defences of convention and restraint had been penetrated, it was surprisingly easy to be intimate into the telephone, very intimate indeed...

Inevitably Edmund's various employers began to complain of late deliveries. In one case a decline in standard was also alleged – which was ominous because Edmund knew that few publishers and editors can afford to care much about the quality of a translation. The complaint probably implied some different, unnamed complaint in the background. On the other hand, Edmund now spent less time and money shopping; although previously he had contrived to continue gratifying some few of his more refined and expensive tastes, he now fed more and more on bread, potatoes, and the wholly flavourless 'luncheon meat' which a shop in the next street seemed always to conjure up in Ali Baba-like quantities.

Always it was impossible to tell when Nera would ring next. She might ring at any hour of the twenty-four, although in the main she seemed to favour the early evening or the early hours of the morning. Edmund would sit all day waiting for her, unable to work or eat; then, after she had telephoned at

six or seven o'clock, find himself so nervously exhausted by the wasted hours that still he was unable to settle himself and concentrate. And things were, of course, made worse at such times by the complete uncertainty as to when he would hear from her again. For a long time a bad sleeper, he now hardly slept at all; so that when the bell rang at three or four in the morning, he was already taut and wakeful, and rose to answer like an opium-eater going to his brew and knowing as he goes that he is making worse tension for himself in the future.

A minor nuisance was the shortness of the flex. Unlike most women, Teddie had not provided for the telephone to stand by her bed. It stood at the other end of the studio, under the big window, and therefore nearly on the floor. The most inconvenient place possible, Edmund had thought soon after he took possession; especially in that the hanging of Teddie's pictures made it difficult to reposition the bed.

On one occasion Nera suggested an application for a longer flex.

'Don't suppose they'd give me one.'

'I got a longer flex years ago. Do try, darling.' But Edmund did nothing. One reason was that he feared lest Nera ring up while the flex purveyor was in the studio, so that his end of one of their strange indispensible conversations would be overheard and questioned. A worse possibility was that the fitting of the flex might involve the temporary disconnection of the telephone, so that he might miss a call altogether. He was at all times haunted by the possibility that if he were to miss one of Nera's calls, there might never be another one.

He found it impossible to communicate to her such fears as these. He had tried never to let her know even that he waited for hours, in fact all day and all night, for her calls, but sought to leave with her the presumption that it was by happy accident alone that so far she had always found him in. For whereas his attendance was incessant, her calls were remarkably undependable, and, all things considered, not particularly frequent. It was, in fact, this irregularity and infrequency which especially made Edmund shrink from disclosing his servitude to the little black instrument. Against

Nera's refusal of information surely essential, he maintained this fiction of freedom.

Somewhere about the end of February began the intrusion of the Chromium Supergloss Corporation. For some reason the telephone began to ring several times a day (on some days as much as twelve or fifteen times), and when Edmund lifted the receiver it was almost always to discover the caller was dialling for the Corporation. Often when he ventured out in quest of his unappetising food, he would hear his telephone ringing from the bottom of the staircase to the studios. The studios were on the fourth floor of the block, with flats below; and had it been a still higher block, Edmund would not have been there, for he much feared heights. He would race up the eight flights of stone steps, his heart beating even more from warring emotions than from the ill-alimented exertion, collapse on the floor under the big window, and find only a customer for the Corporation, peevish at having reached the wrong number. These numerous strangers, Edmund noticed, regularly, when they got that far in their demands, asked for Extension 281. Edmund felt that this extension must be a busy one, but he knew that the Corporation was a large and multifunctional organisation, as was confirmed by the fact that calls for it (commonly still for Extension 281) not infrequently reached him after office hours, and indeed throughout the night.

The incessant 'wrong number' calls tended to convert Edmund from a passive into an active servitor of the telephone. After some weeks of it, he did write a strong letter to the Supervisor; and then, ten days later, received a courteous acknowledgement, printed in a carefully chosen type-face, and with a handwritten postscript, difficult to read but apparently conveying an assurance that this complaint was 'under investigation'. The calls continued as before. This development in Edmund's relationship with the telephone helped to conceal from him for some time that Nera's calls were becoming slowly but markedly fewer than ever. One morning he noticed that there were buds on the plane trees beneath the studio window, and realised that, although the telephone bell seemed seldom to stop ringing, he had not heard from Nera for a week. Instantly his concentration upon the telephone leapt to and remained at a new intensity. As the tender tide of spring trickled

round the grey rocks of London, Edmund became a man eviscerated and absorbed by the squat black monster tethered by its stubby flex.

As soon as possible, he challenged Nera. 'Wrong number' calls had been coming in all that day, varied by one call which was not a wrong number but informed Edmund that he would not be wanted to translate the Italian book on the eighteenth century in England after all. Nera came through at 11:25P.M. precisely. She was as alluring as ever; roses in Edmund's horizonless desert. Never in retrospect could he at all determine what it was about those bare words of hers, intensified by no accessory charm beyond her attractive voice, which so moved him that he had become as one of Odysseus's sailors. Now he remonstrated and begged.

At first she made light of her remissness and little of Edmund's trouble. He noticed, however, that she did not, as she had originally seemed to do, claim that she had been *unable* to telephone. Convinced that she was tiring of their inadequate and unsatisfying association, he found himself pleading desperately.

'I can't live without you.' The rags and bones of his pride had hitherto prevented him from admitting so much as long as she persisted without explanation in standing so far off.

'Oh,' she said. 'Then it's time for me to come and see you.' Her voice was soft as grass new sprung from the seed.

This fulfilment of her previous vague promise was the last thing that Edmund had expected. He looked round the room for his reflection, but Teddie had managed to smash the mirror on the day she left, and Edmund had not replaced it.

'Yes,' he said in a low voice. 'Any time. When?'

'Very soon. Wait for me. Goodbye.'

After that Nera stopped telephoning Edmund altogether; but the telephone itself began to behave more and more strangely. The calls for the Corporation came as frequently as before; but now there were other calls

which were wholly inexplicable. Believing that Nera would surely ring him up to tell him when she was coming, Edmund became more frightened than ever lest he miss a single one of them. He renewed efforts, suspended as unavailing during the first week of his tenancy, to arrange for food to be delivered at his door, but with no more success than then. Now, moreover, his money was fast running out, and the reservoir was by no means being replenished. He tried to arrange credit with the shop in the next street, but was no more successful than when he tried to persuade them to deliver. Edmund had never been apt with shop assistants, and now he felt that he was being eyed with positive hatred. There was a long London heat-wave, premature, opaque, and damp; through which Edmund sat seeing almost nobody, eating almost nothing, and no longer waiting for, but increasingly ministering to the telephone.

Sometimes now he would lift the receiver and hear only a crescendo of terrifying abuse and curses; at other times, groans and screams, as of the dying or the damned. Sometimes unknown voices would conduct hectoring or wheedling conversations with him; and when he questioned them upon the number they wanted, persist that they wanted his. If he rang off, they would often ring again; threatening, or breaking down. Sometimes there was a cat's-cradle of confused noises, in part, it seemed to Edmund, mechanical, in part simply disembodied and without significance. Several times there was laughter on the line; and once an enormous voice which plunged through Edmund's head, then diminished before plunging again. It was like overhearing an immense ram as it battered its way through mighty resistances and defences. It was even more frightening than the confused noises.

One day the studio bell rang. It was the first occasion for weeks. Edmund, supposing that the shop in the next street might have changed its mind, opened the door. It was Teddie's friend Toby.

'Didn't recognize you, St. Jude. It's that beard...'

He was inside the studio before Edmund could stop him.

'Sorry to butt in when you're not dressed.'

He looked round for Edmund to offer him a cigarette.

'When's Teddie coming back? Do you hear from her?' He barely attempted even the surface of politeness.

'I see that you do.' He picked up a heap of air mail envelopes which stood on Teddie's Benares table.

'Unopened, by God.' Toby was staring at Edmund. He was now by the window. Edmund was at the door, willing him to go.

The telephone rang.

Toby lifted the receiver.

'Miss Taylor-Smith's studio.'

Edmund was upon him, fighting like a starving animal.

'What the hell –'

Toby's free arm wheeled round, pushed rather than struck: and Edmund was on the floor.

'It's a bloke called Sefton.' Toby was holding out the receiver. He seemed to bear no malice, but instead of going, he seated himself in Teddie's big armchair and found a cigarette of his own.

Sefton was speaking. 'I say, is everything all right?'

'Of course.' Edmund was picking himself up.

'Then in that case I can only say there's something wrong with your line. I've been trying to get you for days. I should report it to the Supervisor.'

'I'm sorry.'

'It's all right. But I've got some bad news. Did you know that Queenie's dead?'

'No, I didn't. When did it happen?'

'I've only just heard about it. From another mutual friend, you know. But it seems she died about six months ago. Same trouble as her husband, I understand. It must have been about the time we last met. Strange how small the world is. I just thought I'd let you know, in case you hadn't heard.'

'Thank you,' said Edmund. 'I suppose you don't know who's now got her telephone number?'

'I don't,' said Sefton. 'If it matters, I should ask the Exchange.'

Toby didn't move when Edmund rang off. 'Still having trouble with the telephone?' he asked, filling the stuffy air with cigarette smoke and crossing his legs. 'It was going on when I came here before. Remember?'

'What makes you think –' began Edmund.

'I overheard your friend Sefton. I'm used to the telephone, you know. You're not.'

Edmund was now waiting for it to ring again.

'Things mechanical are like the ladies,' continued Toby. 'You need to understand their ways. If you understand them, they'll do what you want from the start. If you don't, they've got you. And then God help you.'

'Would you mind going?' said Edmund.

'I'll go,' said Toby. 'But first let me get the Supervisor for you.' He rose, returned to the telephone, and dialled o. Edmund, wrought up because the line was again being occupied, would have liked to stop him, but could not see how.

'Get me the Supervisor.'

There was a pause, but only a short one.

Toby gave the number. 'There've been a lot of complaints about delays in getting through. Look into it, will you, and report back as soon as possible?'

Clearly the answer was deferential.

'That's all.' He was about to ring off, but Edmund stopped him.

'I've got something to say myself.'

'Hold on.' Toby handed over the receiver.

'Would you mind leaving me?'

'OK. I'll be back. About Teddie, you know.' His glance was on the heap of unopened letters. 'I happen to love that girl, St. Jude.' He went. This time he even shut the door.

'Hullo,' said Edmund.

'Do you wish to make a complaint?' enquired the voice at the other end, fretful with waiting.

'No. I just want to know who's got a certain number.' He mentioned the number which Sefton had given him, and which he would never forget.

'We're not supposed to give information like that,' snapped the voice. 'But hold on.' Plainly some part of Toby's aura remained.

There was a long wait.

'That number's dead.'

'I rang up. And someone answered.'

'Oh, you often get an answer on a dead number.'

'How can that be?'

'Dead person, I suppose.' Whether or not this was meant for facetiousness was unsure because the voice then rang off. Toby would never have been so treated.

None the less, the telephone now ceased to ring, as had happened on the previous occasion when Edmund had grappled with the Exchange. Instead the studio was filled by day and night with a silent hot airlessness into which the children on the walls stared with assertive insignificance. There were no more callers, no more money, and, Edmund realised, no more letters from Teddie. After a week of silence, Edmund brought himself to tear open the last of the heap. The contents appalled him. Alarmed by his long-continued failure to write, Teddie was on her way home. She had left the New Mexico sanatorium in defiance of a united medical commination. Edmund looked at the date. Clearly she might arrive at any moment.

He dialled the familiar number. One or another kind of climax was inevitable. He could hear the telephone ringing, but faintly and distantly, as if at the end of a very long corridor. Then, although the bell continued dimly audible, he heard a voice.

'At last, darling, at last.'

'Nera! Where have you been?'

'There are terrible difficulties. We have to find a channel, you know.'

'We?' Edmund could still hear the bell, far off and minute. It was as if cushioned by a very thick fog.

'I've been trying to reach you, darling, ever since you came here. Didn't you know?' She laughed coquettishly. 'But here I am! You can ring off.'

As she spoke, the bell stopped ringing, and the line went quite silent.

'The line's gone dead.'

'Already?' She seemed unconcerned.

'Where are you?'

'What frightful-looking children? Put back the receiver, darling. You said the line was dead.'

Edmund's arm slowly dropped, lowering the receiver to his waist, as he fell back against the window. 'Where are you?'

'As the line's already dead, I suppose it doesn't matter whether you put back the receiver or not.' The worst thing was that her voice still sounded exactly as it had sounded over the telephone; attractive though it was, it retained the effect of having been filtered through the Exchange. Edmund let fall the receiver. It crashed to the floor.

'For God's sake, where are you?'

'I'm *here,* darling.' The voice, slightly dehumanised, seemed to come from no particular point. 'You said you couldn't live without me.'

'I can't see you.' The breakfast-food faces of the children smiled brightly at him through the sunshine.

'Not yet, darling. You said you couldn't live without me.'

'What do you mean?'

'Darling, you said you couldn't live without me.' It was exactly like one of the telephone's standard locutions: 'Sorry you've been troubled,' or 'Number please'.

Edmund placed his hands before his eyes.

'Now there's no need to live without me. Don't you understand? Darling, just look behind you. Over your shoulder.'

Edmund stood rigid.

'Just one look, darling.'

Edmund was trembling all over with hunger and loneliness and terror.

'You must look, you know, darling.' The puppet-like voice seemed nearer. 'If you knew how hard it's been to reach you –'

Edmund was groping for his last charges of willpower.

'Now turn your head, darling.'

There was a rat-tat-tat at the door. Edmund clenched his fists and leapt towards it. He was sobbing as he flung it open.

'Bread.'

The shop in the next street had taken pity on him.

*

When Teddie arrived home, full of evil surmises, she duly found that Edmund was not only in hospital but on the danger-list. Immediately she put on her pinkest Transatlantic frock, and, accompanied by Toby, a note from whom, left in the studio against her arrival, had given her the news, went to visit him. She found him unbelievably thin, and his face a cadaverous dirty yellow, but immediately she approached, he clutched her hand and croaked, 'I love you, Nera. Forgive me, Nera. Please please forgive me.'

Teddie withdrew her hand. The nurse was looking at her penetratingly.

Toby shrugged, as if he had known all the time. 'Name mean anything to you?'

'A little,' said Teddie, and changed the subject. Edmund said nothing further, but lay glazed and panting.

'I think you'd better go now, Miss Taylor-Smith. You have your own health to take care of.' Toby must have told her.

'He looks like a poet,' said Teddie. 'Will he get better?'

'Naturally we shall do all we can.'

*

'No, Toby. It's quite impossible. She can't even paint. Not even as well as me.' All the children smiled benignly; Toby did not care how well or badly Teddie painted.

'Nothing like that's impossible. Particularly not with a cove like St. Jude.'

'Well, *this* is impossible.' She thought for a moment. 'Look, Toby. If you still doubt me, I'll introduce you.'

'OK by me. I'm only trying to save you from making a big mistake.'

'She's always at home in the evening.'

On the way to Nera Condamine's flat, which was in another part of London, he put his arm round her.

'Of course I know she was lonely.'

'There you are.'

'She used to ring me up at all hours. She always wanted me to ring her back. Where she worked. Some number or other – Extension 281.'

'Now that does cut out St. Jude. Never known a chap so scared of the telephone.'

Teddie wriggled herself free for the moment. 'I'm going to introduce you anyway. You were at the hospital, and this must be stopped.'

*

'What's that on the floor?'

They had been standing for several minutes in the dim passage, unavailingly manipulating Miss Condamine's small brass knocker. The design was a jester's head.

'Telephone Directory,' reported Toby. 'A to D volume with her in it. Issued in July.'

They looked at one another.

'They bring it round, you know. If there's no answer, they leave it.'

Teddie raised the flap of the letter-box.

'Toby!' Now she clutched his arm.

Toby squared up to the door. 'Shall I?'

Teddie was coughing. But she nodded emphatically.

Both door and lock were cheap and nasty; and Toby was through in a minute. Inside the sun came mistily through the drawn magenta blinds. It was simpler to switch on the light.

The details it revealed were most horrible. Dressed in decaying party pyjamas of cerise satin, and regarded by several academic but aphrodisiac studies of the nude, lay on a chaise-longue the elderly body of Miss Condamine, a bread knife in one mouldering, but still well-shaped hand. With the knife she appeared for some reason to have amputated the telephone from the telephone system; but none the less the unusually long flex was wound tightly round her again and again and again from neck to ankles.

Ringing The Changes (1955)

He had never been among those many who deeply dislike church bells, but the ringing that evening at Holihaven changed his view. Bells could certainly get on one's nerves, he felt, although he had only just arrived in the town.

He had been too well aware of the perils attendant upon marrying a girl twenty-four years younger than himself to add to them by a conventional honeymoon. The strange force of Phrynne's love had borne both of them away from their previous selves: in him a formerly haphazard and easy-going approach to life had been replaced by much deep planning to wall in happiness; and she, though once thought cold and choosy, would now agree to anything as long as she was with him. He had said that if they were to marry in June, it would be at the cost of not being able to honeymoon until October. Had they been courting longer, he had explained, gravely smiling, special arrangements could have been made; but, as it was, business claimed him. This, indeed, was true; because his business position was less influential than he had led Phrynne to believe. Finally, it would have been impossible for them to have courted longer, because they had courted from the day they met, which was less than six weeks before the day they married.

'"A village,"' he had quoted as they entered the branch-line train at the junction (itself sufficiently remote), '"from which (it was said) persons of sufficient longevity might hope to reach Liverpool Street."' By now he was able to make jokes about age, although perhaps he did so rather too often.

'Who said that?'

'Bertrand Russell.'

She had looked at him with her big eyes in her tiny face.

'Really.' He had smiled confirmation.

'I'm not arguing.' She had still been looking at him. The romantic gas light in the charming period compartment had left him uncertain whether she was smiling back or not. He had given himself the benefit of the doubt, and kissed her.

The guard had blown his whistle and they had rumbled into the darkness. The branch line swung so sharply away from the main line that Phrynne had been almost toppled from her seat. 'Why do we go so slowly when it's so flat?'

'Because the engineer laid the line up and down the hills and valleys such as they are, instead of cutting through and embanking over them.' He liked being able to inform her.

'How do you know? Gerald! You said you hadn't been to Holihaven before.'

'It applies to most of the railways in East Anglia.'

'So that even though it's flatter, it's slower?'

'Time matters less.'

'I should have hated going to a place where time mattered or that you'd been to before. You'd have had nothing to remember me by.'

He hadn't been quite sure that her words exactly expressed her thought, but the thought had lightened his heart.

*

Holihaven station could hardly have been built in the days of the town's magnificence, for they were in the Middle Ages; but it still implied grander functions than came its way now. The platforms were long enough for visiting London expresses, which had since gone elsewhere; and the architecture of the waiting-rooms would have been not insufficient for occasional use by Foreign Royalty. Oil lamps on perches like those occupied by macaws lighted the uniformed staff, who numbered two, and,

together with every other native of Holihaven, looked like storm-habituated mariners.

The stationmaster and porter, as Gerald took them to be, watched him approach down the platform, with a heavy suitcase in each hand and Phrynne walking deliciously by his side. He saw one of them address a remark to the other, but neither offered to help. Gerald had to put down the cases in order to give up their tickets. The other passengers had already disappeared.

'Where's the Bell?'

Gerald had found the hotel in a reference book. It was the only one the book allotted to Holihaven. But as Gerald spoke, and before the ticket collector could answer, the sudden deep note of an actual bell rang through the darkness. Phrynne caught hold of Gerald's sleeve.

Ignoring Gerald, the stationmaster, if such he was, turned to his colleague. 'They're starting early.'

'Every reason to be in good time,' said the other man.

The stationmaster nodded, and put Gerald's tickets indifferently in his jacket pocket.

'Can you please tell me how I get to the Bell Hotel?'

The stationmaster's attention returned to him. 'Have you a room booked?'

'Certainly.'

'Tonight?' The stationmaster looked inappropriately suspicious.

'Of course.'

Again the stationmaster looked at the other man.

'It's them Pascoes.'

'Yes,' said Gerald. 'That's the name, Pascoe.'

'We don't use the Bell,' explained the stationmaster. 'But you'll find it in Wrack Street.' He gesticulated vaguely and unhelpfully. 'Straight ahead. Down Station Road. Then down Wrack Street. You can't miss it.'

'Thank you.'

As soon as they entered the town, the big bell began to boom regularly.

'What narrow streets!' said Phrynne.

'They follow the lines of the medieval city. Before the river silted up, Holihaven was one of the most important seaports in Great Britain.'

'Where's everybody got to?'

Although it was only six o'clock, the place certainly seemed deserted.

'Where's the hotel got to?' rejoined Gerald.

'Poor Gerald! Let me help.' She laid her hand beside his on the handle of the suitcase nearest to her, but as she was about fifteen inches shorter than he, she could be of little assistance. They must already have gone more than a quarter of a mile. 'Do you think we're in the right street?'

'Most unlikely, I should say. But there's no one to ask.'

'Must be early closing day.'

The single deep notes of the bell were now coming more frequently.

'Why are they ringing that bell? Is it a funeral?'

'Bit late for a funeral.'

She looked at him a little anxiously.

'Anyway it's not cold.'

'Considering we're on the east coast it's quite astonishingly warm.'

'Not that I care.'

'I hope that bell isn't going to ring all night.'

She pulled on the suitcase. His arms were in any case almost parting from his body. 'Look! We've passed it.'

They stopped, and he looked back. 'How could we have done that?'

'Well, we have.'

She was right. He could see a big ornamental bell hanging from a bracket attached to a house about a hundred yards behind them.

They retraced their steps and entered the hotel. A woman dressed in a navy blue coat and skirt, with a good figure but dyed red hair and a face ridged with make-up, advanced upon them.

'Mr and Mrs Banstead?' I'm Hilda Pascoe. Don, my husband, isn't very well.'

Gerald felt full of doubts. His arrangements were not going as they should. Never rely on guide-book recommendations. The trouble lay partly in Phrynne's insistence that they go somewhere he did not know. 'I'm sorry to hear that,' he said.

'You know what men are like when they're ill?' Mrs Pascoe spoke understandingly to Phrynne.

'Impossible,' said Phrynne. 'Or very difficult.'

'Talk about Woman in our hours of ease.'

'Yes,' said Phrynne. 'What's the trouble?'

'It's always the same trouble with Don,' said Mrs Pascoe, then checked herself. 'It's his stomach,' she said. 'Ever since he was a kid, Don's had

trouble with the lining of his stomach.'

Gerald interrupted, 'I wonder if we could see our room?'

'So sorry,' said Mrs Pascoe. 'Will you register first?' She produced a battered volume bound in peeling imitation leather. 'Just the name and address.' She spoke as if Gerald might contribute a resume of his life.

It was the first time he and Phrynne had ever registered in a hotel; but his confidence in the place was not increased by the long period which had passed since the registration above.

'We're always quiet in October,' remarked Mrs Pascoe, her eyes upon him. Gerald noticed that her eyes were slightly bloodshot. 'Except sometimes for the bars, of course.'

'We wanted to come out of the season,' said Phrynne soothingly.

'Quite,' said Mrs Pascoe.

'Are we alone in the house?' inquired Gerald. After all the woman was probably doing her best.

'Except for Commandant Shotcroft. You won't mind him, will you? He's a regular.'

'I'm sure we shan't,' said Phrynne.

'People say the house wouldn't be the same without Commandant Shotcroft.

'I see.'

'What's that bell?' asked Gerald. Apart from anything else, it really was much too near.

Mrs Pascoe looked away. He thought she looked shifty under her entrenched make-up. But she only said, 'Practice.'

'Do you mean there will be more of them later?'

She nodded. 'But never mind,' she said encouragingly. 'Let me show you to your room. Sorry there's no porter.'

Before they had reached the bedroom, the whole peal had commenced.

'Is this the quietest room you have?' inquired Gerald. 'What about the other side of the house?'

'This is the other side of the house. Saint Guthlac's is over there.' She pointed out through the bedroom door.

'Darling,' said Phrynne, her hand on Gerald's arm, 'they'll soon stop. They're only practicing.'

Mrs Pascoe said nothing. Her expression indicated that she was one of those people whose friendliness has a precise and seldom exceeded limit.

'If you don't mind,' said Gerald to Phrynne, hesitating.

'They have ways of their own in Holihaven,' said Mrs Pascoe. Her undertone of militancy implied, among other things, that if Gerald and Phrynne chose to leave, they were at liberty to do so. Gerald did not care for that either: her attitude would have been different, he felt, had there been anywhere else for them to go. The bells were making him touchy and irritable.

'It's a very pretty room,' said Phrynne. 'I adore four- posters.'

'Thank you,' said Gerald to Mrs Pascoe. 'What time's dinner?'

'Seven-thirty. You've time for a drink in the bar first.' She went.

'We certainly have,' said Gerald when the door was shut. 'It's only just six.'

'Actually,' said Phrynne, who was standing by the window looking down into the street, 'I like church bells.'

'All very well,' said Gerald, 'but on one's honeymoon they distract the attention.'

'Not mine,' said Phrynne simply. Then she added, 'There's still no one about.'

'I expect they're all in the bar.'

'I don't want a drink. I want to explore the town.'

'As you wish. But hadn't you better unpack?'

'I ought to, but I'm not going to. Not until after I've seen the sea.' Such small shows of independence in her enchanted Gerald.

Mrs Pascoe was not about when they passed through the lounge, nor was there any sound of activity in the establishment.

Outside, the bells seemed to be booming and bounding immediately over their heads.

'It's like warriors fighting in the sky,' shouted Phrynne. 'Do you think the sea's down there?' She indicated the direction from which they had previously retraced their steps.

'I imagine so. The street seems to end in nothing. That would be the sea.'

'Come on. Let's run.' She was off, before he could even think about it. Then there was nothing to do but run after her. He hoped there were not eyes behind blinds.

She stopped, and held wide her arms to catch him. The top of her head hardly came up to his chin. He knew she was silently indicating that his failure to keep up with her was not a matter for self-consciousness.

'Isn't it beautiful?'

'The sea?' There was no moon; and little was discernible beyond the end of the street.

'Not only.'

'Everything but the sea. The sea's invisible.'

'You can smell it.'

'I certainly can't hear it.'

She slackened her embrace and cocked her head away from him. 'The bells echo so much, it's as if there were two churches.'

'I'm sure there are more than that. There always are in old towns like this.' Suddenly he was struck by the significance of his words in relation to what she had said. He shrank into himself, tautly listening.

'Yes,' cried Phrynne delightedly. 'It is another church.'

'Impossible,' said Gerald. 'Two churches wouldn't have practice ringing on the same night.'

'I'm quite sure. I can hear one lot of bells with my left ear, and another lot with my right.'

They had still seen no one. The sparse gas lights fell on the furnishings of a stone quay, small but plainly in regular use. 'The whole population must be ringing the bells.' His own remark discomfited Gerald.

'Good for them.' She took his hand. 'Let's go down on the beach and look for the sea.'

They descended a flight of stone steps at which the sea had sucked and bitten. The beach was as stony as the steps, but lumpier.

'We'll just go straight on,' said Phrynne. 'Until we find it.' Left to himself, Gerald would have been less keen. The stones were very large and very slippery, and his eyes did not seem to be becoming accustomed to the dark.

'You're right, Phrynne, about the smell.'

'Honest sea smell.'

'Just as you say.' He took it rather to be the smell of dense rotting weed; across which he supposed they must be slithering. It was not a smell he had previously encountered in such strength.

Energy could hardly be spared for talking, and advancing hand in hand was impossible.

After various random remarks on both sides and the lapse of what seemed a very long time, Phrynne spoke again. 'Gerald, where is it? What sort of seaport is it that has no sea?'

She continued onwards, but Gerald stopped and looked back. He had thought the distance they had gone overlong, but was startled to see how great it was. The darkness was doubtless deceitful, but the few lights on the quay appeared as on a distant horizon.

The far glimmering specks still in his eyes, he turned and looked after Phrynne. He could barely see her. Perhaps she was progressing faster without him.

'Phrynne! Darling!'

Unexpectedly she gave a sharp cry.

'Phrynne!'

She did not answer.

'Phrynne! '

Then she spoke more or less calmly. Panic over. 'Sorry, darling. I stood on something.'

He realized that a panic it had indeed been; at least in him.

'You're all right?'

'Think so.'

He struggled up to her. 'The smell's worse than ever.' It was overpowering.

'I think it's coming from what I stepped on. My foot went right in, and then there was the smell.'

'I've never known anything like it.'

'Sorry, darling,' she said gently mocking him. 'Let's go away.'

'Let's go back. Don't you think?'

'Yes,' said Phrynne. 'But I must warn you Im very disappointed. I think that seaside attractions should include the sea.'

He noticed that as they retreated, she was scraping the sides of one shoe against the stones, as if trying to clean it.

'I think the whole place is a disappointment,' he said. 'I really must apologize. We'll go somewhere else.'

'I like the bells,' she replied, making a careful reservation. Gerald said nothing.

'I don't want to go somewhere where you've been before.' The bells rang out over the desolate, unattractive beach. Now the sound seemed to be coming from every point along the shore.

'I suppose all the churches practice on the same night in order to get it over with,' said Gerald.

'They do it in order to see which can ring the loudest,' said Phrynne.

'Take care you don't twist your ankle.'

The din as they reached the rough little quay was such as to suggest that Phrynne's idea was literally true.

The Coffee Room was so low that Gerald had to dip beneath a sequence of thick beams.

'Why "Coffee Room"?' asked Phrynne, looking at the words on the door. 'I saw a notice that coffee will only be served in the lounge.'

'It's the *lucus a non lucendo* principle.'

'That explains everything. I wonder where we sit.' A single electric lantern, mass produced in an antique pattern, had been turned on. The bulb was of that limited wattage which is peculiar to hotels. It did little to penetrate the shadows.

'The *lucus a non lucendo* principle is the principle of calling white black.'

'Not at all,' said a voice from the darkness. 'On the contrary. The word black comes from an ancient root which means "to bleach".'

They had thought themselves alone, but now saw a small man seated by himself at an unlighted corner table. In the darkness he looked like a monkey.

'I stand corrected,' said Gerald.

They sat at the table under the lantern.

The man in the comer spoke again. 'Why are you here at all?'

Phrynne looked frightened, but Gerald replied quietly.

'We're on holiday. We prefer it out of the season. I presume you are Commandant Shotcroft?'

'No need to presume.' Unexpectedly the Commandant switched on the antique lantern which was nearest to him. His table was littered with a finished meal. It struck Gerald that he must have switched off the light when he heard them approach the Coffee Room. 'I'm going anyway.'

'Are we late?' asked Phrynne, always the assuager of situations.

'No, you're not late,' said the Commandant in a deep, moody voice. 'My meals are prepared half an hour before the time the rest come in. I don't like

eating in company.' He had risen to his feet. 'So perhaps you excuse me.'

Without troubling about an answer, he stepped quickly out of the Coffee Room. He had cropped white hair; tragic, heavy-lidded eyes; and a round face which was yellow and lined.

A second later his head reappeared round the door.

'Ring,' he said; and again withdrew.

'Too many other people ringing,' said Gerald. 'But I don't see what else we can do.'

The Coffee Room bell, however, made a noise like a fire alarm.

Mrs Pascoe appeared. She looked considerably the worse for drink.

'Didn't see you in the bar.'

'Must have missed us in the crowd,' said Gerald amiably.

'Crowd?' inquired Mrs Pascoe drunkenly. Then, after a difficult pause, she offered them a hand-written menu.

They ordered; and Mrs Pascoe served them throughout. Gerald was apprehensive lest her indisposition increase during the course of the meal; but her insobriety, like her affability, seemed to have an exact and definite limit.

'All things considered, the food might be worse,' remarked

Gerald, towards the end. It was a relief that something was going reasonably well. 'Not much of it, but at least the dishes are hot.'

When Phrynne translated this into a compliment to the cook, Mrs Pascoe said, 'I cooked it all myself, although I shouldn't be the one to say so.'

Gerald felt really surprised that she was in a condition to have accomplished this. Possibly, he reflected with alarm, she had had much

practice under similar conditions.

'Coffee is served in the lounge,' said Mrs Pascoe.

They withdrew. In a corner of the lounge was a screen decorated with winning Elizabethan ladies in ruffs and hoops. From behind it projected a pair of small black boots. Phrynne nudged Gerald and pointed to them. Gerald nodded. They felt themselves constrained to talk about things which bored them.

The hotel was old and its walls thick. In the empty lounge the noise of the bells could not prevent conversation being overheard, but still came from all around, as if the hotel were a fortress beleaguered by surrounding artillery.

After their second cups of coffee, Gerald suddenly said he couldn't stand it.

'Darling, it's not doing us any harm. I think it's rather cosy.' Phrynne subsided in the wooden chair with its sloping back and long mud-coloured mock-velvet cushions; and opened her pretty legs to the fire.

'Every church in the town must be ringing its bells. It's been going on for two and a half hours and they never seem to take the usual breathers.'

'We wouldn't hear. Because of all the other bells ringing. I think it's nice of them to ring the bells for us.'

Nothing further was said for several minutes. Gerald was beginning to realize that they had yet to evolve a holiday routine.

'I'll get you a drink. What shall it be?'

'Anything you like. Whatever you have.' Phrynne was immersed in female enjoyment of the fire's radiance on her body.

Gerald missed this, and said, 'I don't quite see why they have to keep the place like a hothouse. When I come back, we'll sit somewhere else.'

'Men wear too many clothes, darling,' said Phrynne drowsily. Contrary to his assumption, Gerald found the lounge bar as empty as everywhere else in the hotel and the town. There was not even a person to dispense.

Somewhat irritably, Gerald struck a brass bell which stood on the counter. It rang out sharply as a pistol shot.

Mrs Pascoe appeared at a door among the shelves. She had taken off her jacket, and her make-up had begun to run.

'A cognac, please. Double. And a Kummel.'

Mrs Pascoe's hands were shaking so much that she could not get the cork out of the brandy bottle.

'Allow me.' Gerald stretched his arm across the bar.

Mrs Pascoe stared at him blearily. 'O.K. But I must pour it.' Gerald extracted the cork and returned the bottle. Mrs Pascoe slopped a far from precise dose into a balloon.

Catastrophe followed. Unable to return the bottle to the high shelf where it resided, Mrs Pascoe placed it on a waist-level ledge. Reaching for the alembic of Kummel, she swept the three-quarters full brandy bottle on to the tiled floor. The stuffy air became fogged with the fumes of brandy from behind the bar.

At the door from which Mrs Pascoe had emerged appeared a man from the inner room. Though still youngish, he was puce and puffy, and in his braces, with no collar. Streaks of sandy hair laced his vast red scalp. Liquor oozed all over him, as if from a perished gourd. Gerald took it that this was Don.

The man was too drunk to articulate. He stood in the doorway clinging with each red hand to the ledge, and savagely struggling to flay his wife with imprecations.

'How much?' said Gerald to Mrs Pascoe. It seemed useless to try for the Kummel. The hotel must have another bar.

'Three and six,' said Mrs Pascoe, quite lucidly; but Gerald saw that she was about to weep.

He had the exact sum. She turned her back on him and flicked the cash register. As she returned from it, he heard the fragmentation of glass as she stepped on a piece of the broken bottle. Gerald looked at her husband out of the corner of his eye. The sagging, loose-mouthed figure made him shudder. Something moved him.

'I'm sorry about the accident,' he said to Mrs Pascoe. He held the balloon in one hand, and was just going.

Mrs Pascoe looked at him. The slow tears of desperation were edging down her face, but she now seemed quite sober. 'Mr Banstead,' she said in a flat, hurried voice. 'May I come and sit with you and your wife in the lounge? Just for a few minutes.'

'Of course.' It was certainly not what he wanted, and he wondered what would become of the bar, but he felt unexpectedly sorry for her, and it was impossible to say no.

To reach the flap of the bar she had to pass her husband. Gerald saw her hesitate for a second; then she advanced resolutely and steadily and looking straight before her. If the man had let go with his hands, he would have fallen; but as she passed him, he released a great gob of spit. He was far too incapable to aim, and it fell on the side of his own trousers. Gerald lifted the flap for Mrs Pascoe and stood back to let her precede him from the bar. As he followed her, he heard her husband maundering off into unintelligible inward searchings.

'The Kummel! ' said Mrs Pascoe, remembering in the doorway.

'Never mind,' said Gerald. 'Perhaps I could try one of the other bars?'

'Not tonight. They're shut. I'd better go back.'

'No. We'll think of something else.' It was not yet nine o'clock, and Gerald wondered about the Licensing Justices.

But in the lounge was another unexpected scene. Mrs Pascoe stopped as soon as they entered, and Gerald, caught between two imitation-leather armchairs, looked over her shoulder.

Phrynne had fallen asleep. Her head was slightly on one side, but her mouth was shut, and her body no more than gracefully relaxed, so that she looked most beautiful, and, Gerald thought, a trifle unearthly, like a dead girl in an early picture by Millais.

The quality of her beauty seemed also to have impressed Commandant Shotcroft; for he was standing silently behind her and looking down at her, his sad face transfigured. Gerald noticed that a leaf of the pseudo-Elizabethan screen had been folded back, revealing a small cretonne-covered chair, with an open tome face downward in its seat.

'Won't you join us?' said Gerald boldly. There was that in the Commandant's face which boded no hurt. 'Can I get you a drink?'

The Commandant did not turn his head, and seemed unable to speak. Then in a low voice he said, 'For a moment only.'

'Good,' said Gerald. 'Sit down. And you, Mrs Pascoe.' Mrs Pascoe was dabbing at her face. Gerald addressed the Commandant. 'What shall it be?'

'Nothing to drink,' said the Commandant in the same low mutter. It occurred to Gerald that if Phrynne awoke, the Commandant would go.

'What about you?' Gerald looked at Mrs Pascoe, earnestly hoping she would decline.

'No, thanks.' She was glancing at the Commandant. Clearly she had not expected him to be there.

Phrynne being asleep, Gerald sat down too. He sipped his brandy. It was impossible to romanticize the action with a toast.

The events in the bar had made him forget about the bells. Now, as they sat silently round the sleeping Phrynne, the tide of sound swept over him once more.

'You mustn't think,' said Mrs Pascoe, 'that he's always like that.' They all spoke in hushed voices. All of them seemed to have reason to do so. The Commandant was again gazing somberly at Phrynne's beauty.

'Of course not.' But it was hard to believe.

'The licensed business puts temptations in a man's way.'

'It must be very difficult.'

'We ought never to have come here. We were happy in South Norwood.'

'You must do good business during the season.'

'Two months,' said Mrs Pascoe bitterly, but still softly. 'Two and a half at the very most. The people who come during the season have no idea what goes on out of it.'

'What made you leave South Norwood?'

'Don's stomach. The doctor said the sea air would do him good.'

'Speaking of that, doesn't the sea go too far out? We went down on the beach before dinner, but couldn't see it anywhere.'

On the other side of the fire, the Commandant turned his eyes from Phrynne and looked at Gerald.

'I wouldn't know,' said Mrs Pascoe. 'I never have time to look from one year's end to the other.' It was a customary enough answer, but Gerald felt that it did not disclose the whole truth. He noticed that Mrs Pascoe glanced uneasily at the Commandant, who by now was staring neither at Phrynne nor at Gerald but at the toppling citadels in the fire.

'And now I must get on with my work,' continued Mrs Pascoe, 'I only came in for a minute.' She looked Gerald in the face. 'Thank you,' she said, and rose.

'Please stay a little longer,' said Gerald. 'Wait till my wife wakes up.' As he spoke, Phrynne slightly shifted.

'Can't be done,' said Mrs Pascoe, her lips smiling. Gerald noticed that all the time she was watching the Commandant from under her lids, and knew that were he not there, she would have stayed.

As it was, she went. I'll probably see you later to say good night. Sorry the water's not very hot. It's having no porter.' The bells showed no sign of flagging.

When Mrs Pascoe had closed the door, the Commandant spoke.

'He was a fine man once. Don't think otherwise.'

'You mean Pascoe?'

The Commandant nodded seriously.

'Not my type,' said Gerald.

'DSO and bar. DFC and bar.'

'And now bar only. Why?'

'You heard what she said. It was a lie. They didn't leave South Norwood for the sea air.'

'So I supposed.'

'He got into trouble. He was fixed. He wasn't the kind of man to know about human nature and all its rottenness.'

'A pity,' said Gerald. 'But perhaps, even so, this isn't the best place for him?'

'It's the worst,' said the Commandant, a dark flame in his eyes. 'For him or anyone else.'

Again Phrynne shifted in her sleep: this time more convulsively, so that she nearly awoke. For some reason the two men remained speechless and motionless until she was again breathing steadily. Against the silence within, the bells sounded louder than ever. It was as if the tumult were tearing holes in the roof.

'It's certainly a very noisy place,' said Gerald, still in an undertone.

'Why did you have to come tonight of all nights?' The Commandant spoke in the same undertone, but his vehemence was extreme.

'This doesn't happen often?'

'Once every year.'

'They should have told us.'

'They don't usually accept bookings. They've no right to accept them. When Pascoe was in charge they never did.'

'I expect that Mrs Pascoe felt they were in no position to turn away business.'

'It's not a matter that should be left to a woman.'

'Not much alternative surely?'

'At heart women are creatures of darkness all the time.'

The Commandant's seriousness and bitterness left Gerald without a reply.

'My wife doesn't mind the bells,' he said after a moment. 'In fact she rather likes them.' The Commandant really was converting a nuisance, though an acute one, into a melodrama. The Commandant turned and gazed at him. It struck Gerald that what he had just said in some way, for the Commandant, placed Phrynne also in a category of the lost.

'Take her away, man,' said the Commandant, with scornful ferocity.

'In a day or two perhaps,' said Gerald, patiently polite. 'I admit that we are disappointed with Holihaven.'

'Now. While there's still time. This instant.'

There was an intensity of conviction about the Commandant which was alarming.

Gerald considered. Even the empty lounge, with its dreary decorations and commonplace furniture, seemed inimical. They can hardly go on practising all night,' he said. But now it was fear that hushed his voice.

'Practising!' The Commandant's scorn flickered coldly through the overheated room.

'What else?'

'They're ringing to wake the dead.'

A tremor of wind in the flue momentarily drew on the already roaring fire. Gerald had turned very pale.

'That's a figure of speech,' he said, hardly to be heard.

'Not in Holihaven.' The Commandant's gaze had returned to the fire.

Gerald looked at Phrynne. She was breathing less heavily. His voice dropped to a whisper. 'What happens?'

The Commandant also was nearly whispering. 'No one can tell how long they have to go on ringing. It varies from year to year. I don't know why. You should be all right up to midnight. Probably for some while after. In the end the dead awake. First one or two; then all of them. Tonight even the sea draws back. You have seen that for yourself. In a place like this there are always several drowned each year. This year there've been more than several. But even so that's only a few. Most of them come not from the water but from the earth. It is not a pretty sight.'

'Where do they go?'

'I've never followed them to see. I'm not stark staring mad.' The red of the fire reflected in the Commandant's eyes. There was a long pause.

'I don't believe in the resurrection of the body,' said Gerald. As the hour grew later, the bells grew louder. 'Not of the body.'

'What other kind of resurrection is possible? Everything else is only theory. You can't even imagine it. No one can.' Gerald had not argued such a thing for twenty years. 'So,' he said, 'you advise me to go. Where?'

'Where doesn't matter.'

'I have no car.'

'Then you'd better walk.'

"With her?' He indicated Phrynne only with his eyes.

'She's young and strong.' A forlorn tenderness lay within the Commandant's words. 'She's twenty years younger than you and therefore twenty years more important.'

'Yes,' said Gerald. 'I agree... What about you? What will you do?'

'I've lived here some time now. I know what to do.'

'And the Pascoes?'

'He's drunk. There is nothing in the world to fear if you're thoroughly drunk. DSO and bar. DFC and bar.'

'But you are not drinking yourself?'

'Not since I came to Holihaven. I lost the knack.'

Suddenly Phrynne sat up. 'Hullo,' she said to the Commandant; not yet fully awake. Then she said, 'What fun! The bells are still ringing.'

The Commandant rose, his eyes averted. 'I don't think there's anything more to say,' he remarked, addressing Gerald. 'You've still got time.' He nodded slightly to Phrynne, and walked out of the lounge.

'What have you still got time for?' asked Phrynne, stretching. 'Was he trying to convert you? I'm sure he's an Anabaptist.'

'Something like that,' said Gerald, trying to think.

'Shall we go to bed? Sorry, I'm so sleepy.'

'Nothing to be sorry about.'

'Or shall we go for another walk? That would wake me up. besides the tide might have come in.'

Gerald, although he half-despised himself for it, found it impossible to explain to her that they should leave at once; without transport or a destination; walk all night if necessary. He said to himself that probably he would not go even were he alone.

'If you're sleepy, it's probably a good thing.'

'Darling!'

'I mean with these bells. God knows when they will stop.' Instantly he felt a new pang of fear at what he had said.

Mrs Pascoe had appeared at the door leading to the bar, and opposite to that from which the Commandant had departed. She bore two steaming glasses on a tray. She looked about, possibly to confirm that the Commandant had really gone.

'I thought you might both like a nightcap. Ovaltine, with something in it.'

'Thank you,' said Phrynne. 'I can't think of anything nicer.' Gerald set the glass on a wicker table, and quickly finished his cognac.

Mrs Pascoe began to move chairs and slap cushions. She looked very haggard.

'Is the Commandant an Anabaptist?' asked Phrynne over her shoulder. She was proud of her ability to outdistance Gerald in beginning to consume a hot drink.

Mrs Pascoe stopped slapping for a moment. 'I don't know what that is,' she said.

'He's left his book,' said Phrynne, on a new tack.

Mrs Pascoe looked at it indifferently across the lounge.

'I wonder what he's reading,' continued Phrynne. 'Fox's Lives of the Martyrs, I expect.' A small unusual devil seemed to have entered into her.

But Mrs Pascoe knew the answer. 'It's always the same,' she said, contemptuously. 'He only reads one. It's called Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World. He's been reading it ever since he came here. When he gets to the end, he starts again.'

'Should I take it up to him?' asked Gerald. It was neither courtesy nor inclination, but rather a fear lest the Commandant return to the lounge: a desire, after those few minutes of reflection, to cross-examine.

'Thanks very much,' said Mrs Pascoe, as if relieved of a similar apprehension. 'Room One. Next to the suit of Japanese armour.' She went on tipping and banging. To Gerald's inflamed nerves, her behavior seemed too consciously normal.

He collected the book and made his way upstairs. The volume was bound in real leather, and the tops of its pages were gilded: apparently a presentation copy. Outside the lounge, Gerald looked at the flyleaf: in a very large hand was written: 'To my dear Son, Raglan, on his being honoured by the Queen. From his proud Father, B. Shotcroft, Major-general.' Beneath the inscription a very ugly military crest had been appended by a stamper of primitive type.

The suit of Japanese armour lurked in a dark comer as the Commandant himself had done when Gerald had first encountered him. The wide brim of the helmet concealed the black eyeholes in the headpiece; the moustache bristled realistically. It was exactly as if the figure stood guard over the door behind it. On this door was no number, but, there being no other in sight, Gerald took it to be the door of Number One. A short way down the dim empty passage was a window, the ancient sashes of which shook in the din and blast of the bells. Gerald knocked sharply.

If there was a reply, the bells drowned it; and he knocked again. When to the third knocking there was still no answer, he gently opened the door. He really had to know whether all would, or could, be well if Phrynne, and doubtless he also, were at all costs to remain in their room until it was dawn. He looked into the room and caught his breath.

There was no artificial light, but the curtains, if there were any, had been drawn back from the single window, and the bottom sash forced up as far as it would go. On the floor by the dusky void, a maelstrom of sound, knelt the Commandant, his cropped white hair faintly catching the moonless glimmer, as his head lay on the sill, like that of a man about to be guillotined. His face was in his hands, but slightly sideways, so that Gerald received a shadowy distorted idea of his expression. Some might have called it ecstatic, but Gerald found it agonized. It frightened him more than anything which had yet happened. Inside the room the bells were like plunging roaring lions.

He stood for some considerable time quite unable to move. He could not determine whether or not the Commandant knew he was there. The Commandant gave no direct sign of it, but more than once he writhed and shuddered in Gerald's direction, like an unquiet sleeper made more unquiet by an interloper. It was a matter of doubt whether Gerald should leave the book; and he decided to do so mainly because the thought of further contact with it displeased him. He crept into the room and softly laid it on a hardly visible wooden trunk at the foot of the plain metal bedstead. There seemed no other furniture in the room. Outside the door, the hanging mailed fingers of the Japanese figure touched his wrist.

He had not been away from the lounge for long, but it was long enough for Mrs Pascoe to have begun again to drink. She had left the tidying up half-completed, or rather the room half-disarranged; and was leaning against the overmantel, drawing heavily on a dark tumbler of whisky. Phrynne had not yet finished her Ovaltine.

'How long before the bells stop?' asked Gerald as soon as he opened the lounge door. Now he was resolved that, come what might, they must go. The impossibility of sleep should serve as excuse.

'I don't expect Mrs Pascoe can know any more than we can,' said Phrynne.

'You should have told us about this - this annual event - before accepting our booking.'

Mrs Pascoe drank some more whisky. Gerald suspected that it was neat. 'It's not always the same night,' she said throatily, looking at the floor.

'We're not staying,' said Gerald wildly.

'Darling! ' Phrynne caught him by the arm.

'Leave this to me, Phrynne.' He addressed Mrs Pascoe. 'We'll pay for the room, of course. Please order me a car.'

Mrs Pascoe was now regarding him stonily. When he asked for a car, she gave a very short laugh. Then her face changed. She made an effort, and said, 'You mustn't take the Commandant so seriously, you know.'

Phrynne glanced quickly at her husband. The whisky was finished. Mrs Pascoe placed the empty glass on the plastic overmantel with too much of a thud. 'No one takes Commandant Shotcroft seriously,' she said. 'Not even his nearest and dearest.'

'Has he any?' asked Phrynne. 'He seemed so lonely and pathetic.'

'He's Don and I's mascot,' she said, the drink interfering with her grammar. But not even the drink could leave any doubt about her rancour.

'I thought he had personality,' said Phrynne.

'That and a lot more, no doubt,' said Airs Pascoe. 'But they pushed him out, all the same.'

'Out of what?'

'Cashiered, court-martialled, badges of rank stripped off, sword broken in half, muffled drums, the works.'

'Poor old man. I'm sure it was a miscarriage of justice.'

'That's because you don't know him.'

Mrs Pascoe looked as if she were waiting for Gerald to offer her another whisky.

'It's a thing he could never live down,' said Phrynne, brooding to herself, and tucking her legs beneath her. 'No wonder he's so queer if all the time it was a mistake.'

'I just told you it was not a mistake,' said Mrs Pascoe insolently.

'How can we possibly know?'

'You can't. I can. No one better.' She was at once aggressive and tearful.

'If you want to be paid,' cried Gerald, forcing himself in, 'make out your bill. Phrynne, come upstairs and pack.' If only he hadn't made her unpack between their walk and dinner.

Slowly Phrynne uncoiled and rose to her feet. She had no intention of either packing or departing, nor was she going to argue. 'I shall need your help,' she said. 'If I'm going to pack.'

In Mrs Pascoe there was another change. Now she looked terrified. 'Don't go. Please don't go. Not now. It's too late.'

Gerald confronted her. 'Too late for what?' he asked harshly.

Mrs Pascoe looked paler than ever. 'You said you wanted a car,' she faltered. 'You're too late.' Her voice trailed away.

Gerald took Phrynne by the arm. 'Come on up.'

Before they reached the door, Mrs Pascoe made a further attempt. 'You'll be all right if you stay. Really you will.' Her voice, normally somewhat strident, was so feeble that the bells obliterated it. Gerald observed that from somewhere she had produced the whisky bottle and was refilling her tumbler.

With Phrynne on his arm he went first to the stout front door. To his surprise it was neither locked nor bolted, but opened at a half-turn of the handle. Outside the building the whole sky was full of bells, the air an inferno of ringing.

He thought that for the first time Phrynne's face also seemed strained and crestfallen. 'They've been ringing too long,' she said, drawing close to him. 'I wish they'd stop.'

'We're packing and going. I needed to know whether we could get out this way. We must shut the door quietly.'

It creaked a bit on its hinges, and he hesitated with it halfshut, uncertain whether to rush the creak or to ease it. Suddenly, something dark and shapeless, with its arm seeming to hold a black vesture over its head, flitted, all sharp angles, like a bat, down the narrow ill-lighted street, the sound of its passage audible to none. It was the first being that either of them had seen in the streets of Holihaven; and Gerald was acutely relieved that he alone had set eyes upon it. With his hand trembling, he shut the door much too sharply.

But no one could possibly have heard, although he stopped for a second outside the lounge. He could hear Mrs Pascoe now weeping hysterically; and again was glad that Phrynne was a step or two ahead of him. Upstairs the Commandant's door lay straight before them: they had to pass close beside the Japanese figure, in order to take the passage to the left of it.

But soon they were in their room, with the key turned in the big rim lock.

'Oh God,' cried Gerald, sinking on the double bed. 'It's pandemonium.' Not for the first time that evening he was instantly more frightened than ever by the unintended appositeness of his own words.

'It's pandemonium all right,' said Phrynne, almost calmly. 'And we're not going out in it.'

He was at a loss to divine how much she knew, guessed, or imagined; and any word of enlightenment from him might be inconceivably dangerous. But he was conscious of the strength of her resistance, and lacked the reserves to battle with it.

She was looking out of the window into the main street. We might will them to stop,' she suggested wearily.

Gerald was now far less frightened of the bells continuing than of their ceasing. But that they should go on ringing until day broke seemed hopelessly impossible.

Then one peal stopped. There could be no other explanation for the obvious diminution in sound.

'You see!' said Phrynne. Gerald sat up straight on the side of the bed.

Almost at once further sections of sound subsided, quickly one after the other, until only a single peal was left, that which had begun the ringing. Then the single peal tapered off into a single bell. The single bell tolled on its own, disjointedly, five or six or seven times. Then it stopped, and there was nothing.

Gerald's head was a cave of echoes, mountingly muffled by the noisy current of his blood.

'Oh goodness,' said Phrynne, turning from the window and stretching her arms above her head. 'Let's go somewhere else tomorrow.' She began to take off her dress.

Sooner than usual they were in bed, and in one another's arms. Gerald had carefully not looked out of the window, and neither of them suggested that it should be opened, as they usually did.

'As it's a four-poster, shouldn't we draw the curtains?' asked Phrynne. 'And be really snug? After those damned bells?'

'We should suffocate.'

'Did they suffocate when everyone had four-posters?'

'They only drew the curtains when people were likely to pass through the room.'

'Darling, you're shivering. I think we should draw them.'

'Lie still instead and love me.'

But all his nerves were straining out into the silence. There was no sound of any kind, beyond the hotel or within it; not a creaking floorboard nor a prowling cat nor a distant owl. He had been afraid to look at his watch when the bells stopped, or since; the number of the dark hours before they could leave Holihaven weighed on him. The vision of the Commandant kneeling in the dark window was clear before his eyes, as if the intervening panelled walls were made of stage gauze; and the thing he had seen in the street darted on its angular way back and forth through memory.

Then passion began to open its petals within him, layer upon slow layer; like an illusionist's red flower which, without soil or sun or sap, grows as it is watched. The languor of tenderness began to fill the musty room with its texture and perfume. The transparent walls became again opaque, the old man's vaticinations mere obsession. The street must have been empty, as it was now; the eye deceived.

But perhaps rather it was the boundless sequacity of love that deceived, and most of all in the matter of the time which had passed since the bells stopped ringing; for suddenly Phrynne drew very close to him, and he heard steps in the thoroughfare outside, and a voice calling. These were loud

steps, audible from afar even through the shut window; and the voice had the possessed stridency of the street evangelist.

'The dead are awake!'

Not even the thick bucolic accent, the guttural vibrato of emotion, could twist or mask the meaning. At first Gerald lay listening with all his body, and concentrating the more as the noise grew; then he sprang from the bed and ran to the window.

A burly, long-limbed man in a seaman's jersey was running down the street, coming clearly into a view for a second at each lamp, and between them lapsing into a swaying lumpy wraith.

As he shouted his joyous message, he crossed from side to side and waved his arms like a negro. By flashes, Gerald could see that his weatherworn face was transfigured.

'The dead are awake!'

Already, behind him, people were coming out of their houses, and descending from the rooms above shops. There were men, women, and children. Most of them were fully dressed, and must have been waiting in silence and darkness for the call; but a few were dishevelled in night attire or the first garments which had come to hand. Some formed themselves into groups, and advanced arm in arm, as if towards the conclusion of a Blackpool beano. More came singly, ecstatic and waving their arms above their heads, as the first man had done. All cried out, again and again, with no cohesion or harmony. 'The dead are awake! The dead are awake! '

Gerald become aware the Phrynne was standing behind him.

'The Commandant warned me,' he said brokenly. 'We should have gone.'

Phrynne shook her head and took his arm. 'Nowhere to go,' she said. But her voice was soft with fear, and her eyes blank. 'I don't expect they'll trouble us.'

Swiftly Gerald drew the thick plush curtains, leaving them in complete darkness. 'We'll sit it out,' he said, slightly histrionic in his fear. 'No matter what happens.'

He scrambled across to the switch. But when he pressed it, light did not come. 'The current's gone. We must get back into bed.'

'Gerald! Come and help me.' He remembered that she was curiously vulnerable in the dark. He found his way to her, and guided her to the bed.

'No more love,' she said ruefully and affectionately, her teeth chattering.

He kissed her lips with what gentleness the total night made possible.

'They were going towards the sea,' she said timidly.

'We must think of something else.'

But the noise was still growing. The whole community seemed to be passing down the street, yelling the same dreadful words again and again.

'Do you think we can?'

'Yes,' said Gerald. 'It's only until tomorrow.'

'They can't be actually dangerous,' said Phrynne. 'Or it would be stopped.'

'Yes, of course.'

By now, as always happens, the crowd had amalgamated their utterances and were beginning to shout in unison. They were like agitators bawling a slogan, or massed trouble-makers at a football match. But at the same time the noise was beginning to draw away. Gerald suspected that the entire population of the place was on the march.

Soon it was apparent that a processional route was being followed. The tumult could be heard winding about from quarter to quarter; sometimes drawing near, so that Gerald and Phrynne were once more seized by the first chill of panic, then again almost fading away. It was possibly this great

variability in the volume of the sound which led Gerald to believe that there were distinct pauses in the massed shouting; periods when it was superseded by far, disorderly cheering. Certainly it began also to seem that the thing shouted had changed; but he could not make out the new cry, although unwillingly he strained to do so.

'It's extraordinary how frightened one can be,' said Phrynne, 'even when one is not directly menaced. It must prove that we all belong to one another, or whatever it is, after all.'

In many similar remarks they discussed the thing at one remove. Experience showed that this was better than not discussing it at all.

In the end there could be no doubt that the shouting had stopped, and that now the crowd was singing. It was no song that Gerald had ever heard, but something about the way it was sung convinced him that it was a hymn or psalm set to an out-of-date popular tune. Once more the crowd was approaching; this time steadily, but with strange, interminable slowness.

'What the hell are they doing now?' asked Gerald of the blackness, his nerves wound so tight that the foolish question was forced out of them.

Palpably the crowd had completed its peregrination, and was returning up the main street from the sea. The singers seemed to gasp and fluctuate, as if worn out with gay exercise, like children at a party. There was a steady undertow of scraping and scuffling. Time passed and more time.

Phrynne spoke. 'I believe they're dancing'

She moved slightly, as if she thought of going to see.

'No, no,' said Gerald and clutched her fiercely.

There was a tremendous concussion on the ground floor below them. The front door had been violently thrown back.

They could hear the hotel filling with a stamping, singing mob.

Doors banged everywhere, and furniture was overturned, as the beatific throng surged and stumbled through the involved darkness of the old building. Glasses went and china and Birmingham brass warming pans. In a moment, Gerald heard the Japanese armour crash to the boards. Phrynne screamed. Then a mighty shoulder, made strong by the sea's assault, rammed at the panelling and their door was down.

The living and the dead dance together.
Now's the time. Now's the place. Now's the weather.

At last Gerald could make out the words.

The stresses in the song were heavily beaten down by much repetition.

Hand in hand, through the dim grey gap of the doorway, the dancers lumbered and shambled in, singing frenziedly but brokenly; ecstatic but exhausted. Through the stuffy blackness they swayed and shambled, more and more of them, until the room must have been packed tight with them.

Phrynne screamed again. 'The smell. Oh God, the smell.'

It was the smell they had encountered on the beach; in the congested room, no longer merely offensive, but obscene, unspeakable.

Phrynne was hysterical. All self-control gone, she was scratching and tearing, and screaming again and again. Gerald tried to hold her, but one of the dancers in the darkness struck him so hard that she was jolted out of his arms. Instantly it seemed that she was no longer there at all.

The dancers were thronging everywhere, their limbs whirling, their lungs bursting with the rhythm of the song. It was difficult for Gerald even to call out. He tried to struggle after Phrynne, but immediately a blow from a massive elbow knocked him to the floor, an abyss of invisible trampling feet.

But soon the dancers were going again; not only from the room, but, it seemed, from the building also. Crushed and tormented though he was, Gerald could hear the song being presumed in the street, as the various

frenzied groups debouched and reunited. Within, before long there was nothing but the chaos, the darkness, and the putrescent odour. Gerald felt so sick that he had to battle with unconsciousness. He could not think or move, despite the desperate need.

Then he struggled into a sitting position, and sank his head on the torn sheets of the bed. For an uncertain period he was insensible to everything; but in the end he heard steps approaching down the dark passage. His door was pushed back, and the Commandant entered gripping a lighted candle. He seemed to disregard the flow of hot wax which had already congealed on much of his knotted hand.

'She's safe. Small thanks to you.'

The Commandant stared icily at Gerald's undignified figure. Gerald tried to stand. He was terribly bruised, and so giddy that he wondered if this could be concussion. But relief rallied him.

'Is it thanks to you?'

'She was caught up in it. Dancing with the rest.' The Commandant's eyes glowed in the candle-light. The singing and dancing had almost died away.

Still Gerald could do no more than sit up on the bed. His voice was low and indistinct, as if coming from outside his body. 'Were they... were some of them...'

The Commandant replied more scornful than ever of his weakness. 'She was between two of them. Each had one of her hands.'

Gerald could not look at him. 'What did you do?' he asked in the same remote voice.

'I did what had to be done. I hope I was in time.' After the slightest possible pause he continued. 'You'll find her downstairs.'

'I'm grateful. Such a silly thing to say, but what else is there?'

'Can you walk?'

'I think so.'

'I'll light you down.' The Commandant's tone was as uncompromising as always.

There were two more candles in the lounge, and Phrynne, wearing a woman's belted overcoat which was not hers, sat between them drinking. Mrs Pascoe, fully dressed but with eyes averted, pottered about the wreckage. It seemed hardly more than as if she were completing the task which earlier she had left unfinished.

'Darling, look at you!' Phrynne's words were still hysterical, but her voice was as gentle as it usually was.

Gerald, bruises and thoughts of concussion forgotten, dragged her into his arms. They embraced silently for a long time; then he looked into her eyes.

'Here I am,' she said, and looked away. 'Not to worry.'

Silently and unnoticed, the Commandant had already retreated.

Without returning his gaze, Phrynne finished her drink as she stood there. Gerald supposed that it was one of Mrs Pascoe's concoctions.

It was so dark where Mrs Pascoe was working that her labours could have been achieving little; but she said nothing to her visitors, nor they to her. At the door Phrynne unexpectedly stripped off the overcoat and threw it on a chair. Her nightdress was so torn that she stood almost naked. Dark though it was, Gerald saw Mrs Pascoe regarding Phrynne's pretty body with a stare of animosity.

'May we take one of the candles?' he said, normal standards reasserting themselves in him.

But Mrs Pascoe continued to stand silently staring; and they lighted themselves through the wilderness of broken furniture to the ruins of their bedroom. The Japanese figure was still prostrate, and the Commandant's door shut. And the smell had almost gone.

Even by seven o'clock the next morning surprisingly much had been done to restore order. But no one seemed to be about, and Gerald and Phrynne departed without a word.

In Wrack Street a milkman was delivering, but Gerald noticed that his cart bore the name of another town. A minute boy whom they encountered later on an obscure purposeful errand might, however, have been indigenous; and when they reached Station Road, they saw a small plot of land on which already men were silently at work with spades in their hands. They were as thick as flies on a wound, and as black. In the darkness of the previous evening, Gerald and Phrynne had missed the place. A board named it the New Municipal Cemetery.

In the mild light of an autumn morning the sight of the black and silent toilers was horrible; but Phrynne did not seem to find it so. On the contrary, her cheeks reddened and her soft mouth became fleetingly more voluptuous still.

She seemed to have forgotten Gerald, so that he was able to examine her closely for a moment. It was the first time he had done so since the night before. Then, once more, she became herself. In those previous seconds Gerald had become aware of something dividing them which neither of them would ever mention or ever forget.

The School Friend (1964)

It would be false modesty to deny that Sally Tessler and I were the bright girls of the school. Later it was understood that I went more and more swiftly to the bad, but Sally continued being bright for some considerable time. Like many males, but few females, even among those inclined to scholarship, Sally combined a true love for the classics, the ancient ones, with an insight into mathematics which, to the small degree that I was interested, seemed to me almost magical. She won three scholarships, two gold medals, and a sojourn among the Hellenes with all expenses paid. Before she had graduated she had published a little book of popular mathematics which, I understood, made her a surprising sum of money. Later she edited several lesser Latin authors, published in editions so small that they can have brought her nothing but inner satisfaction.

The foundations of all this erudition had almost certainly been laid in Sally's earliest childhood. The tale went that Dr. Tessler had once been the victim of some serious injustice, or considered he had: certainly it seemed to be true that, as his neighbors put it, he "never went out." Sally herself once told me that she not only could remember nothing of her mother, but had never come across any trace or record of her. From the very beginning Sally had been brought up, it was said, by her father alone. Rumor suggested that Dr. Tessler's regimen was threefold: reading, domestic drudgery, and obedience. I deduced that he used the last to enforce the two first: when Sally was not scrubbing the floor or washing up, she was studying Vergil and Euclid. Even then I suspected that the doctor's ways of making his will felt would not have borne examination by the other parents. Certainly, however, when Sally first appeared at school, she had much more than a grounding in almost every subject taught, and in several which were not taught. Sally, therefore, was from the first a considerable irritant to the mistresses. She was always two years or more below the average age of her form. She had a real technique of acquiring knowledge. She respected learning in her preceptors and detected its absence. I once tried to find out in what subject Dr. Tessler had obtained his doctorate. I failed, but, of course, one then expected a German to be a doctor.

It was the first school Sally had attended. I was a member of the form to which she was originally assigned, but in which she remained for less than a week, so eclipsing to the rest of us was her mass of information. She was thirteen years and five months old at the time, nearly a year younger than I. (I owe it to myself to say that I was promoted at the end of the term, and thereafter more or less kept pace with the prodigy, although this, perhaps, was for special reasons.) Her hair was remarkably beautiful; a perfect light blonde, and lustrous with brushing, although cut short and "done" in no particular way, indeed usually very untidy. She had dark eyes, a pale skin, a large, distinguished nose, and a larger mouth. She had also a slim but precocious figure, which later put me in mind of Tessa in "The Constant Nymph." For better or for worse, there was no school uniform, and Sally invariably appeared in a dark-blue dress of foreign aspect and extreme simplicity, which nonetheless distinctly became her looks. As she grew, she seemed to wear later editions of the same dress, new and enlarged, like certain publications.

Sally, in fact, was beautiful, but one would be unlikely ever to meet another so lovely who was so entirely and genuinely unaware of the fact and of its implications. And, of course, her casualness about her appearance, and her simple clothes, added to her charm. Her disposition seemed kindly and easygoing in the extreme, and her voice was lazy to drawling. But Sally, nonetheless, seemed to live only in order to work; and although I was, I think, her closest friend (it was the urge to keep up with her which explained much of my own progress in the school), I learned very little about her. She seemed to have no pocket money at all: as this amounted to a social deficiency of the vastest magnitude and as my parents could afford to be and were generous, I regularly shared with her. She accepted the arrangement simply and warmly. In return she gave me frequent little presents of books: a copy of Goethe's Faust in the original language and bound in somewhat discouraging brown leather, and an edition of Petronius, with some remarkable drawings. Much later, when in need of money for a friend, I took the Faust, in no hopeful spirit, to Sotheby's. It proved to be a rebound first edition...

But it was a conversation about the illustrations in the Petronius (I was able to construe Latin fairly well for a girl, but the italics and long s's daunted

me) which led me to the discovery that Sally knew more than any of us about the subject illustrated. Despite her startling range of information, she seemed then, and certainly for long after, completely disinterested in any personal way. It was as if she discoursed, in the gentlest, sweetest manner, about some distant far-off thing, or, to use a comparison absurdly hackneyed but here appropriate, about botany. It was an ordinary enough school, and sex was a preoccupation among us. Sally's attitude was surprisingly new and unusual. In the end she did ask me not to tell the others what she had just told me. "As if I would," I replied challengingly, but still musingly.

And in fact I didn't tell anyone until considerably later: when I found that I had learned from Sally things which no one else at all seemed to know, things which I sometimes think have in themselves influenced my life, so to say, not a little. Once I tried to work out how old Sally was at the time of this conversation. I think she could hardly have been more than fifteen.

In the end Sally won her university scholarship, and I just failed, but won the school's English Essay Prize, and also the Good Conduct Medal, which I deemed (and still deem) in the nature of a stigma, but believed, consolingly, to be awarded more to my prosperous father than to me. Sally's conduct was in any case much better than mine, being indeed irreproachable. I had entered for the scholarship with the intention of forcing the examiners, in the unlikely event of my winning it, to bestow it upon Sally, who really needed it. When this doubtless impracticable scheme proved unnecessary, Sally and I parted company, she to her triumphs of the intellect, I to my lesser achievements. We corresponded intermittently, but decreasingly as our areas of common interest diminished. Ultimately, for a very considerable time, I lost sight of her altogether, although occasionally over the years I used to see reviews of her learned books, and encounter references to her in leading articles about the Classical Association and similar indispensable bodies. I took it for granted that by now we should have difficulty in communicating. I observed that Sally did not marry. One couldn't wonder, I foolishly and unkindly drifted into supposing...

When I was forty-one, two things happened which have a bearing on this narrative. The first was that a catastrophe befell me which led to my again

taking up residence with my parents. Details are superfluous. The second thing was the death of Dr. Tessler.

I should probably have heard of Dr. Tessler's death in any case, for my parents, who, like me and the rest of the neighbors, had never set eyes upon him, had always regarded him with mild curiosity. As it was, the first I knew of it was when I saw the funeral. I was shopping on behalf of my mother and reflecting upon the vileness of things, when I observed old Mr. Orbit remove his hat, in which he always served, and briefly sink his head in prayer. Between the aggregations of Shredded Wheat in the window, I saw the passing shape of a very old-fashioned and therefore very ornate horse-drawn hearse. It bore a coffin covered in a pall of worn purple velvet, but there seemed to be no mourners at all.

"Didn't think never to see a 'orse 'earse again, Mr. Orbit," remarked old Mrs. Ring, who was ahead of me in the queue.

"Pauper funeral, I expect," said her friend, old Mrs. Edge,

"No such thing no more," said Mr. Orbit quite sharply, and replacing his hat. "That's Dr. Tessler's funeral. Don't suppose 'e 'ad no family come to look after things."

I believe the three white heads then got together and began to whisper, but on hearing the name, I had made towards the door. I looked out. The huge ancient hearse, complete with vast black plumes, looked much too big for the narrow autumnal street. It put me in mind of how toys are often so grossly out of scale with one another. I could now see that instead of mourners, a group of urchins, shadowy in the fading light, ran behind the bier, shrieking and jeering, a most regrettable scene in a well-conducted township.

For the first time in months, if not years, I wondered about Sally.

Three days later she appeared without warning at my parents' front door. It was I who opened it.

"Hullo, Mel."

One hears of people who after many years take up a conversation as if the same number of hours had passed. This was a case in point. Sally, moreover, looked almost wholly unchanged. Possibly her lustrous hair was a half shade darker, but it was still short and wild. Her lovely white skin was un wrinkled. Her large mouth smiled sweetly but, as always, somewhat absently. She was dressed in the most ordinary clothes but still managed to look like anything but a don or a dominie, although neither did she look like a woman of the world. It was, I reflected, hard to decide what she did look like.

"Hullo, Sally."

I kissed her and began to condole.

"Father really died before I was born. You know that."

"I have heard something."

I should not have been sorry to hear more, but Sally threw off her coat, sank clown before the fire, and said, "I've read all your books. I loved them. I should have written.

"Thank you," I said. "I wish there were more who felt like you.

"You're an artist, Mel. You can't expect to be a success at the same time." She was warming her white hands. I was not sure that I was an artist, but it was nice to be told.

There was a circle of leather-covered armchairs round the fire. I sat down beside her. "I've read about you often in the Times Lit," I said, "but that's all. For years. Much too long."

"I'm glad you're still living here," she replied.

"Not still. Again."

"Oh?" She smiled in her gentle, absent way.

"Following a session in the frying pan and another one in the fire... I'm sure you've been conducting yourself more sensibly " I was still fishing.

But all she said was, "Anyway, I'm still glad you're living here."

"Can't say I am. But why in particular?"

"Silly Mel! Because I'm going to live here too."

I had never even thought of it.

I could not resist a direct question.

"Who told you your father was ill?"

"A friend. I've come all the way from Asia Minor. I've been looking at potsherds." She was remarkably untanned for one who had been living under the sun, but her skin was of the kind which does not tan readily.

"It will be lovely to have you about again. Lovely, Sally. But what will you do here?"

"What do you do?"

"I write... In other ways my life is rather over, I feel."

"I write too. Sometimes. At least I edit... And I don't think my life, properly speaking, has ever begun."

I had spoken in self-pity, although I had not wholly meant to do so. The tone of her reply I found it impossible to define. Certainly, I thought with slight malice, certainly she does look absurdly virginal.

A week later a van arrived at Dr. Tessler's house, containing a great number of books, a few packed trunks, and little else; and Sally moved in. She offered no further explanation for this gesture of semiretirement from the gay world (for we lived about forty miles from London, too many for urban participation, too few for rural self-sufficiency), but it occurred to me that Sally's resources were doubtless not so large that she could disregard an

opportunity to live rent-free, although I had no idea whether the house was freehold, and there was no mention even of a will. Sally was and always had been so vague about practicalities that I was a little worried about these matters, but she declined ideas of help. There was no doubt that if she were to offer the house for sale, she could not expect from the proceeds an income big enough to enable her to live elsewhere, and I could imagine that she shrank from the bother and uncertainty of letting.

I heard about the contents of the van from Mr. Ditch, the remover, and it was, in fact, not until she had been in residence for about ten days that Sally sent me an invitation. During this time and after she had refused my help with her affairs, I had thought it best to leave her alone. Now, although the house which I must henceforth think of as hers, stood only about a quarter of a mile from the house of my parents, she sent me a postcard. It was a picture postcard of Mytilene. She asked me to tea.

The way was through the avenues and round the corners of a midnineteenth-century housing estate for merchants and professional men. My parents' house was intended for the former, Sally's for the latter. It stood, in fact, at the very end of a cul-de-sac: even now the house opposite bore the plate of a dentist.

I had often stared at the house during Dr. Tessler's occupancy and before I knew Sally, but not until that day did I enter it. The outside looked much as it had ever done. The house was built in a grey brick so depressing that one speculated how anyone could ever come to choose it (as many once did, however, throughout the Home Counties). To the right of the front door (approached by twelve steps, with blue and white tessellated risers) protruded a greatly disproportionate obtuse- angled bay window: it resembled the thrusting nose on a grey and wrinkled face. This bay window served the basement, the ground floor, and the first floor: between the two latter ran a dull-red string course "in an acanthus pattern", like a chaplet round the temples of a dowager. From the second-floor window it might have been possible to step onto the top of the projecting bay, the better to view the dentist's office opposite, had not the second-floor window been barred, doubtless as protection for a nursery. The wooden gate had fallen from its hinges and had to be lifted open and shut. It was startlingly heavy.

The bell was in order.

Sally was, of course, alone in the house.

Immediately she opened the door (which included two large tracts of colored glass), I apprehended a change in her, essentially the first change in all the time I had known her, for the woman who had come to my parents' house a fortnight or three weeks before had seemed to me very much the girl who had joined my class when we were both children. But now there was a difference...

In the first place she looked different. Previously there had always been a distinction about her appearance, however inexpensive her clothes. Now she wore a fawn jumper which needed washing and stained, creaseless grey slacks. When a woman wears trousers, they need to be smart. These were slacks indeed. Sally's hair was not so much picturesquely untidy as in the past but, more truly, in bad need of trimming. She wore distasteful sandals. And her expression had altered.

"Hullo, Mel. Do you mind sitting down and waiting for the kettle to boil?" She showed me into the ground-floor room (although to make possible the basement, it was cocked high in the air) with the bay window. "Just throw your coat on a chair." She bustled precipitately away. It occurred to me that Sally's culinary aplomb had diminished since her busy childhood of legend.

The room was horrible. I had expected eccentricity, discomfort, bookworminess, even perhaps the slightly macabre. But the room was entirely commonplace, and in the most unpleasing fashion. The furniture had probably been mass-produced in the early twenties. It was of the kind which it is impossible, by any expenditure of time and polish, to keep in good order. The carpet was dingy jazz. There were soulless little pictures in gilt frames. There were dreadful modern knickknacks. There was a radio set, obviously long broken... For the time of year, the rickety, smoky fire offered none too much heat. Rejecting Sally's invitation, I drew my coat about me.

There was nothing to read except a prewar copy of "Tit-Bits," which I found on-the floor under the lumpy settee. Like Sally's jumper the dense

lace curtains could have done with a wash. But before long Sally appeared with tea: six uniform pink cakes from the nearest shop and a flavorless liquid full of floating "strangers." The crockery accorded with the other appurtenances.

I asked Sally whether she had started work of any kind.

"Not yet," she replied, a little dourly. "I've got to get things going in the house first."

"I suppose your father left things in a mess?"

She looked at me sharply. "Father never went out of his library."

She seemed to suppose that I knew more than I did. Looking round me, I found it hard to visualize a "library." I changed the subject.

"Aren't you going to find it rather a big house for one?"

It seemed a harmless, though uninspired, question. But Sally, instead of answering, simply sat staring before her. Although it was more as if she stared within her at some unpleasant thought.

I believe in acting upon impulse.

"Sally," I said, "I've got an idea. Why don't you sell this house, which is much too big for you, and come and live with me? We've plenty of room, and my father is the soul of generosity."

She only shook her head. "Thank you, Mel. No." She still seemed absorbed by her own thoughts, disagreeable thoughts.

"You remember what you said the other day. About being glad I was living here. I'm likely to go on living here. I'd love to have you with me, Sally. Please think about it."

She put down her ugly little teaplate on the ugly little table. She had taken a single small bite out of her pink cake. She stretched out her hand towards me, very tentatively, not nearly touching me. She gulped slightly. "Mel—"

I moved to take her hand, but she drew it back. Suddenly she shook her head violently. Then she began to talk about her work.

She did not resume eating or drinking, and indeed both the cakes and the tea, which every now and then she pressed upon me in a casual way more like her former manner, were remarkably unappetizing. But she talked interestingly and familiarly for about half an hour—about indifferent matters. Then she said, "Forgive me, Mel. But I must be getting on."

She rose. Of course I rose too. Then I hesitated.

"Sally . . . Please think about it. I'd like it so much. Please."

"Thank you, Mel. I'll think about it."

"Promise?"

"Promise... Thank you for coming to see me."

"I want to see much more of you."

She stood in the open front door. In the dusk she looked inexplicably harassed and woebegone.

"Come and see me whenever you want. Come to tea tomorrow and stay to dinner." Anything to get her out of that horrible, horrible house.

But, as before, she only said, "I'll think about it."

Walking home it seemed to me that she could only have invited me out of obligation. I was much hurt, and much frightened by the change in her. As I reached my own gate it struck me that the biggest change of all was that she had never once smiled.

When five or six days later I had neither seen nor heard from Sally, I wrote asking her to visit me. For several days she did not reply at all; then she sent me another picture postcard, this lime of some ancient bust in a museum, informing me that she would love to come when she had a little more time. I noticed that she had made a slight error in my address, which she had

hastily and imperfectly corrected. The postman, of course, knew me. I could well imagine that there was much to do in Sally's house. Indeed, it was a house of the kind in which the work is never either satisfying or complete: an ever-open mouth of a house. But despite the tales of her childhood, I could not imagine the Sally I knew doing it... I could not imagine what she was doing, and I admit that I did want to know.

Some time after that I came across Sally in the International Stores. It was not a shop I usually patronized, but Mr. Orbit was out of my father's particular pickles. I could not help wondering whether Sally did not remember perfectly well that it was a shop in which I was seldom found.

She was there when I entered. She was wearing the same grimy slacks and this time a white blouse which was worse than her former jumper, being plainly filthy. Against the autumn she wore a blue raincoat, which I believed to be the same she had worn to school. She looked positively unkempt and far from well. She was nervously shoveling a little heap of dark-blue bags and gaudy packets into a very ancient carryall. Although the shop was fairly full, no one else was waiting to be served at the part of the counter where Sally stood. I walked up to her.

"Good morning, Sally."

She clutched the ugly carryall to her, as if I were about to snatch it. Then at once she became ostentatiously relaxed.

"Don't look at me like that," she said. There was an upsetting little rasp in her voice. "After all, Mel, you're not my mother." Then she walked out of the shop.

"Your change, miss," cried the International Stores clerk after her.

But she was gone. The other women in the shop watched her go as if she were the town tart. Then they closed up along the section of counter where she had been standing.

"Poor thing," said the clerk unexpectedly. He was young. The other women looked at him malevolently and gave their orders with conscious briskness.

Then came Sally's accident.

By this time there could be no doubt that something was much wrong with her, but I had always been very nearly her only friend in the town, and her behavior to me made it difficult for me to help. It was not that I lacked will or, I think, courage but that I was unable to decide how to set about the task. I was still thinking about it when Sally was run over. I imagine that her trouble, whatever it was, had affected her ordinary judgment. Apparently she stepped right under a truck in the High Street, having just visited the Post Office. I learned shortly afterwards that she refused to have letters delivered at her house but insisted upon them being left poste restante.

When she had been taken to the Cottage Hospital, the matron, Miss Garvice, sent for me. Everyone knew that I was Sally's friend.

"Do you know who is her next of kin?"

"I doubt whether she has such a thing in this country."

"Friends?"

"Only I that I know of." I had always wondered about the mysterious informant of Dr. Tessler's passing.

Miss Garvice considered for a moment.

"I'm worried about her house. Strictly speaking, in all the circumstances, I suppose I ought to tell the police and ask them to keep an eye on it. But I am sure she would prefer me to ask you."

From her tone I rather supposed that Miss Garvice knew nothing of the recent changes in Sally. Or perhaps she thought it best to ignore them.

"As you live so close, I wonder if it would be too much to ask you just to look in every now and then? Perhaps dailv might be best?"

I think I accepted mainly because I suspected that something in Sally's life might need, for Sally's sake, to be kept from the wrong people.

"Here are her keys."

It was a numerous assembly for such a commonplace establishment as Sally's.

"I'll do it as I say, Miss Garvice. But how long do you think it will be?"

"Hard to say. But I don't think Sally's going to die."

One trouble was that I felt compelled to face the assignment unaided, because I knew no one in the town who seemed likely to regard Sally's predicament with the sensitiveness and delicacy—and indeed love—which I suspected were essential. There was also a dilemma about whether or not I should explore the house. Doubtless I had no right, but to do so might, on the other hand, possibly be regarded as in Sally's "higher interests." I must acknowledge, nontheless, that my decision to proceed was considerably inspired by curiosity. This did not mean that I should involve others in whatever might be disclosed. Even that odious sitting room would do Sally's reputation no good...

Miss Garvice had concluded by suggesting that I perhaps ought to pay my first visit at once. I went home to lunch. Then I set out.

Among the first things I discovered were that Sally kept every single door of the house locked and that the remains of the tea I had taken with her weeks before still lingered in the sitting room, not, mercifully, the food, but the plates and cups and genteel little knives and the teapot with leaves and liquor at the bottom of it.

Giving onto the passage from the front door was a room adjoining the sitting room and corresponding to it at the back of the house. Presumably one of these rooms was intended by the builder (the house was not a kind to have had an architect) for use as a dining room, the other as a drawing room. I went through the keys. There were big keys, the doors and locks being pretentiously oversized. In the end the door opened. I noticed a stale cold smell. The room appeared to be in complete darkness. Possibly Dr. Tessler's library?

I groped round the inside of the door frame for an electric light switch but could find nothing. I took another half step inside. The room seemed blacker than ever, and the stale cold smell somewhat stronger. I decided to defer exploration until later.

I shut the door and went upstairs. The ground-floor rooms were high, which made the stairs many and steep.

On the first floor were two rooms, corresponding in plan to the other two rooms below. It could be called neither an imaginative design nor a convenient one. I tried the front room first, again going through the rigmarole with the keys. The room was in a dilapidated condition and contained nothing but a considerable mass of papers. They appeared once to have been stacked on the bare floor, but the stacks had long since fallen over, and their component elements had accumulated a deep top-dressing of flaky black particles. The grime was of that ultimate kind which seems to have an actually greasy consistency: the idea of further investigating those neglected masses of scroll and manuscript made me shudder.

The back room was a bedroom, presumably Sally's. All the curtains were drawn, and I had to turn on the light. It contained what must truly be termed, in the worn phrase, "a few sticks of furniture;" all in the same period as the pieces in the sitting room, though more exiguous and spidery looking. The inflated size and height of the room, the heavy plaster cornice, and even heavier plaster rose in the center of the cracked ceiling emphasized the sparseness of the anachronistic furnishings. There was, however, a more modern double-divan bed, very low on the floor, and looking as if it had been slept in but not remade for weeks. Someone seemed to have arisen rather suddenly, as at an alarm clock. I tried to pull open a drawer in the rickety dressing table. It squeaked and stuck, and proved to contain some pathetic-looking underclothes of Sally's. The long curtains were very heavy and dark green.

It was a depressing investigation, but I persisted.

The second floor gave the appearance of having been originally one room, reached from a small landing. There was marked evidence of unskilled cuttings and botches, aimed, it was clear, at partitioning off this single vast

room in order to form a bathroom and lavatory, and a passage giving access thereto. Could the house have been originally built without these necessary amenities? Anything seemed possible. I remembered the chestnut about the architect who forgot the staircase.

But there was something here which I found not only squalid but vaguely frightening. The original door, giving from the small landing into the one room, showed every sign of having been forcibly- burst open and from the inside (characteristically, it had been hung to open outwards). The damage was seemingly not recent (although it is not easy to date such a thing), but the shattered door still hung dejectedly outward from its weighty lower hinge only and, in fact, made it almost impossible to enter the room at all. Gingerly I forced it a little more forward. The ripped woodwork of the heavy door shrieked piercingly as I dragged at it. I looked in. The room, such as it had ever been, had been finally wrecked by the introduction of the batten partition which separated it from the bathroom and was covered with blistered dark-brown varnish. The only contents were a few decaying toys. The nursery, as I remembered from the exterior prospect, Through the gap between the sloping door and its frame, I looked at the barred windows. Like everything else in the house, the bars seemed very heavy. I looked again at the toys. I observed that all of them seemed to be woolly animals. They were rotted with moth and mold, but not so much so as to conceal the fact that at least some of them appeared also to have been mutilated. There were the decomposing leg of a teddy bear, inches away from the main torso; the severed head of a fanciful stuffed bird. It was as unpleasant a scene as every other in the house.

What had Sally been doing all day? As I had suspected, clearly not cleaning the house. There remained the kitchen quarters, and, of course, the late doctor's library.

There were odd scraps of food about the basement, and signs of recent though sketchy cooking. I was almost surprised to discover that Sally had not lived on air. In general, however, the basement suggested nothing more unusual than the familiar feeling of wonder at the combined magnitude and cumbrousness of cooking operations in the homes of our middle-class great-grandfathers.

I looked round for a candle with which to illumine the library. I even opened various drawers, bins, and cupboards. It seemed that there were no candles. In any case, I thought, shivering slightly in the descending dusk, the library was probably a job for more than a single candle. Next time I would provide myself with my father's imposing flashlight.

There seemed nothing more to be done. I had not even taken off my coat. I had discovered little which was calculated to solve the mystery. Could Sally be doping herself? It really seemed a theory. I turned off the kitchen light, ascended to the ground floor, and shutting the front door, descended again to the garden. I eyed the collapsed front gate with new suspicion. Some time later I realized that I had relocked none of the inside doors.

Next morning I called at the Cottage Hospital.

"In a way," said Miss Garvice, "she's much better. Quite surprisingly so."

"Can I see her?"

"I'm afraid not. She's unfortunately had a very restless night."

Miss Garvice was sitting at her desk with a large yellow cat in her lap. As she spoke, the cat looked up into her face with a look of complacent interrogation.

"Not in pain?"

"Not exactly, I think." Miss Garvice turned the cat's head downward towards her knee. She paused before saying, "She's been weeping all night. And talking too. More hysterical than delirious. In the end we had to move her out of the big ward."

"What does she say?"

"It wouldn't be fair to our patients if we repeated what they say when they're not themselves." "I suppose not. Still—"

"I admit that I cannot at all understand what's the matter with her. With her mind, I mean, of course."

"She's suffering from shock." "Yes... But when I said 'mind,' I should perhaps have said 'emotions.'" The cat jumped from Miss Garvice's lap to the floor. It began to rub itself against my stockings. Miss Garvice followed it with her eyes. "Were you able to get to her house?"

"I looked in for a few minutes." Miss Garvice wanted to question me, but she stopped herself and asked, "Everything in order?"

"As far as I could see."

"I wonder if you would collect together a few things and bring them when you next come. I am sure I can leave it to you."

"I'll see what I can do." Remembering the house, I wondered what I could do. I rose. "I'll look in tomorrow, if I may." The cat followed me to the door purring. "Perhaps I shall be able to see Sally then."

Miss Garvice only nodded.

The truth was that I could not rest until I had investigated that back room. I was afraid, of course, but much more curious. Even my fear, I felt, perhaps wrongly, was more fear of the unknown than of anything I imagined myself likely in fact to find. Had there been a sympathetic friend available, I should have been glad of his company (it was a job for a man, or for no one). As it was, loyalty to Sally sent me, as before, alone.

During the morning it had become more and more overcast. In the middle of lunch it began to rain. Throughout the afternoon it rained more and more heavily. My mother said I was mad to go out, but I donned a pair of heavy walking shoes and my riding mackintosh. I had borrowed my father's flashlight before he left that morning for his business.

I first entered the sitting room, where I took off my mackintosh and saturated beret. It would perhaps have been more sensible to hang the dripping objects in the lower regions, but I think I felt it wise not to leave them too far from the front door. I stood for a time in front of the mirror combing my matted hair. The light was fading fast, and it was difficult to see very much. The gusty wind hurled the rain against the big bay window,

down which it descended like a rippling membrane of wax, distorting what little prospect remained outside. The window frame leaked copiously, making little pools on the floor.

I pulled up the collar of my sweater, took the flashlight, and entered the back room. Almost at once in the beam of light, I found the switch. It was placed at the normal height but about three feet from the doorway, as if the intention were precisely to make it impossible for the light to be switched on—or off—from the door. I turned it on.

I had speculated extensively, but the discovery still surprised me. Within the original walls had been laid three courses of stonework, which continued overhead to form an arched vault under the ceiling. The grev stones had been unskillfullv laid, and the vault in particular looked likely to collapse. The inside of the door was reinforced with a single sheet of iron. There remained no window at all. A crude system of electric lighting had been installed, but there seemed provision for neither heating nor ventilation. Conceivably the room was intended for use in air raids; it had palpably been in existence for some time. But in that case it was hard to see why it should still be inhabited as it so plainly was...

For within the dismal place were many rough wooden shelves laden with crumbling brown books, several battered wooden armchairs, a large desk covered with papers, and a camp bed, showing, like the bed upstairs, signs of recent occupancy. Most curious of all were a small ashtray by the bedside choked with cigarette ends, and an empty coffee cup. I lifted the pillow: underneath it were Sally's pajamas, not folded, but stuffed away out of sight. It was difficult to resist the unpleasant idea that she had begun by sleeping in the room upstairs but for some reason had moved down to this stagnant cavern, which, moreover, she had stated that her father had never left.

I like to think of myself as more imaginative than sensible. I had, for example, conceived it as possible that Dr. Tessler had been stark raving mad and that the room he never left would prove to be padded. But no room could be less padded than this one. It was much more like a prison. It seemed impossible that all through her childhood Sally's father had been under some kind of duress. The room also—and horridly—resembled a

tomb. Could the doctor have been one of those visionaries who are given to brooding upon the End and to decking themselves with the symbols of mortality, like Donne with his shroud? It was difficult to believe in Sally emulating her father in this... For some time, I think, I fought off the most probable solution, carefully giving weight to every other suggestion which my mind could muster up. In the end I faced the fact that more than an oubliette or a grave, the place resembled a fortress, and the suggestion that there was something in the house against which protection was necessary, was imperative. The locked doors, the scene of ruin on the second floor, Sally's behavior. I had known it all the time.

I turned off the bleak light, hanging by its kinked flexible cord. As I locked the library door, I wondered upon the unknown troubles which might have followed my failure of yesterday to leave the house as I had found it. I walked the few steps clown the passage from the library to the sitting room, at once preoccupied and alert. But, for my peace of mind, neither preoccupied nor alert enough. Because, although only for a moment, a second, a gleam, when in that almost vanished light I re-entered the sitting room, I saw him.

As if, for my benefit, to make the most of the little light, he stood right up in the big bay window. The view he presented to me was what I should call three-quarters back. But I could see a fraction of the outline of his face, entirely white (a thing which has to be seen to be believed) and with the skin drawn tight over the bones as by a tourniquet. There was a suggestion of wispy hair. I think he wore black, a garment, I thought, like a frock coat. He stood stooped and shadowy, except for the glimpse of white face. Of course I could not see his eyes. Needless to say, he was gone almost as soon as I beheld him, but it would be inexact to say that he went quite immediately. I had a scintilla of time in which to blink. I thought at first that dead or alive, it was Dr. Tessler, but immediately afterwards I thought not.

That evening I tried to take my father into my confidence. I had always considered him the kindest of men, but one from whom I had been carried far out to sea. Now I was interested, as often with people, by the unexpectedness of his response. After I had finished my story (although I did not tell him everything), to which he listened carefully, sometimes

putting an intelligent question about a point I had failed to illuminate, he said, "If you want my opinion, I'll give it to you."

"Please."

"It's simple enough. The whole affair is no business of yours." He smiled to take the sting out of the words, but underneath he seemed unusually serious.

"I'm fond of Sally. Besides Miss Garvice asked me."

"Miss Garvice asked you to look in and see if there was any post, not to poke about the house."

It was undoubtedly my weak point. But neither was it an altogether strong one for him. "Sally wouldn't let the postman deliver," I countered. "She was collecting her letters from the Post Office at the time she was run over. I can't imagine why."

"Don't try," said my father. "But," I said, "what I saw? Even if I had no right to go all over the house."

"Mel," said my father, "you're supposed to write novels. Haven't you noticed by this time that everyone's lives are full of things you can't understand? The exceptional thing is the thing you can understand. I remember a man I knew when I was first in London...

He broke off. "But fortunately we don't have to understand. And for that reason we've no right to scrutinize other people's lives too closely."

Completely baffled, I said nothing.

My father patted me on the shoulder. "You can fancy you see things when the light's not very good, you know. Particularly an artistic girl like you, Mel."

Even by my parents I still liked occasionally to be called a girl.

When I went up to bed, it struck me that again something had been forgotten. This time it was Sally's "few things."

Naturally it was the first matter Miss Garvice mentioned.

"I'm very sorry. I forgot. I think it must have been the rain," I continued, excusing myself like an adolescent to authority.

Miss Garvice very slightly clucked her tongue. But her mind was on something else. She went to the door of her room.

"Serena!"

""Yes, Miss Garvice?"

"See that I'm not disturbed for a few minutes, will you please? I'll call you again."

"Yes, Miss Garvice," Serena disappeared, shutting the door.

"I want to tell you something in confidence."

I smiled. Confidences preannounced are seldom worthwhile.

"You know our routine here. We've been making various tests on Sally. One of them roused our suspicion." Miss Garvice scraped a match on the composition striker which stood on her desk. For the moment she had forgotten the relative cigarette. "Did you know that Sally was pregnant?"

"No," I replied. But it might provide an explanation. Of a few things.

"Normally, of course, I shouldn't tell you. Or anyone else. But Sally is in such a hysterical state. And you say you know of no relatives?"

"None. What can I do?"

"I wonder if you would consider having her to stay with you? Not at once, of course. When we discharge her. Sally's going to need a friend."

"She won't come or she wouldn't. I've already pressed her."

Miss Garvice now was puffing away like a traction engine. "Why did you do that?"

"I'm afraid that's my business."

"You don't know who the father is?"

I said nothing.

"It's not as if Sally were a young girl. To be perfectly frank, there are things about her condition which I don't like."

It was my turn for a question. "What about the accident? Hasn't that affected matters?"

"Strangely enough, no. Although it's nothing less than a miracle. Of one kind or the other," said Miss Garvice, trying to look broad-minded.

I felt that we were unlikely to make further progress. Assuring Miss Garvice that in due course I should invite Sally once more, I asked again if I could see her.

"I am sorry. But it's out of the question for Sally to see anyone." I was glad that Miss Garvice did not revert to the subject of Sally's "few things," although, despite everything, I felt guilty for having forgotten them. Particularly because I had no wish to go back for them. It was out of the question even to think of explaining my real reasons to Miss Garvice, and loyalty to Sally continued to weigh heavily with me, but something must be devised. Moreover I must not take any step which might lead to someone else being sent to Sally's house. The best I could think of was to assemble some of my own "things" and say they were Sally's. It would be for Sally to accept the substitution.

But the question which struck me next morning was whether the contamination in Sally's house could be brought to an end by steps taken in the house itself, or whether it could have influence outside. Sally's mvsterious restlessness, as reported by Miss Garvice, was far from reassuring, but on the whole I inclined to see it as an aftermath or revulsion.

(Sally's pregnancy I refused at this point to consider at all.) It was impossible to doubt that immediate action of some kind was vital. Exorcism? or, conceivably, arson? I doubt whether I am one to whom the former would ever strongly appeal: certainly not as a means of routing something so apparently sensible to feeling as to sight. The latter, on the other hand, might well be defeated (apart from other difficulties) by that stone strongbox of a library. Flight? I considered it long and seriously. But still it seemed that my strongest motive in the whole affair was pity for Sally. So I stayed.

I did not visit the hospital that morning, from complete perplexity as to what there was to do or say, but instead, during the afternoon, wandered back to the house. Despite my horror of the place, I thought that I might hit upon something able to suggest a course of action. I would look more closely at those grimy papers, and even at the books in the library. The idea of burning the place down was still by no means out of my mind. I would further ponder the inflammability of the house, and the degree of risk to the neighbors... All the time, of course, I was completely miscalculating my own strength and what was happening to me.

But as I hoisted the fallen gate, my nerve suddenly left me, again, something which had never happened to me before, either in the course of these events or at any previous time. I felt very sick. I was much afraid lest I faint. My body felt simultaneously tense and insubstantial.

Then I became aware that Mr. Orbit's delivery boy was staring at me from the gate of the dentist's house opposite. I must have presented a queer spectacle, because the boy seemed to be standing petrified. His mouth, I saw, was wide open. I knew the boy quite well. It was essential for all kinds of reasons that I conduct myself suitably. The boy stood, in fact, for public opinion. I took a couple of deep breaths, produced the weighty bunch of keys from my handbag, and ascended the steps as steadily as possible.

Inside the house, I made straight for the basement, with a view to a glass of water. With Mr. Orbit's boy no longer gaping at me, I felt worse than ever, so that, even before I could look for a tumbler or reach the tap, I had to sink upon one of the two battered kitchen chairs. All my hair was damp, and my clothes felt unbearably heavy.

Then I became aware that steps were descending the basement staircase.

I completed my sequence of new experiences by fainting.

I came round to the noise of an animal, a snuffling, grunting cry, which seemed to come, with much persistence, from the floor above. I seemed fo listen to it for some time, even trying, though failing, to identify what animal it was, before recovering more fully and realizing that Sally was leaning back against the dresser and staring at me.

"Sally! It was you."

"Who did you think it was? It's my house."

She no longer wore the stained grey slacks, but was dressed in a very curious way, about which I do not think it fair to say more. In other ways also, the change in her had become complete: her eyes had a repulsive lifelessness; the bone structure of her face, previously so fine, had altered unbelievably. There was an unpleasant croak in her voice, precisely as if her larynx had lost flexibility.

"Will you please return my keys?"

I even had difficulty in understanding what she said, although doubtless my shaky condition did not help. Very foolishly, I rose to my feet, while Sally glared at me with her changed eyes. I had been lying on the stone floor. There was a bad pain in the back of my head and neck.

"Glad to see you're better, Sally. I didn't expect you'd be about for some time yet." My words were incredibly foolish.

She said nothing, but only stretched out her hand. It too was changed: it was grey and bony, with protruding, knotted veins,

I handed her the big bunch of keys. I wondered how she had entered the house without them. The animal wailing above continued without intermission. To it now seemed to be added a noise which struck me as

resembling that of a pig scrabbling. Involuntarily I glanced upwards to the ceiling.

Sally snatched the keys, snatched them gently and softly, not violently; then she cast her unblinking eyes upwards in parody of mine, and emitted an almost deafening shriek of laughter,

"Do you love children, Mel? Would you like to see my baby?" Truly it was the last straw, and I do know quite how I behaved.

Now Sally seemed filled with terrible pride. "Let me tell you, Mel," she said, "that it's possible for a child to be born in a manner you'd never dream of."

I had begun to shudder again, but Sally clutched hold of me with her grey hand and began to drag me up the basement stairs.

"Will you be godmother? Come and see your godchild, Mel."

The noise was coming from the library. I clung to the top of the basement baluster. Distraught as I was, I now realized that the scrabbling sound was connected with the tearing-to-pieces of Dr. Tessler's books. But it was the wheezy, throaty cry of the creature which most turned my heart and sinews to water.

Or to steel. Because as Sally tugged at me, trying to pull me away from the baluster and into the library, I suddenly realized that she had no strength at all. Whatever else had happened to her, she was as weak as a wraith.

I dragged myself free from her, let go of the baluster, and made towards the front door. Sally began to scratch my face and neck, but I made a quite capable job of defending myself. Sally then began to call out in her unnatural voice: she was trying to summon the creature into the passage. She scraped and tore at me, while panting out a stream of dreadful endearments to the thing in the library.

In the end, I found that my hands were about her throat, which was bare despite the cold weather. I could stand no more of that wrecked voice.

Immediately she began to kick, and the shoes she was wearing seemed to have metal toes. I had the final, awful fancy that she had acquired iron feet. Then I threw her from me onto the floor of the passage, and fled from the house.

It was now dark, somehow darker outside the house than inside it, and I found that I still had strength enough to run all the way home.

I went away for a fortnight, although on general grounds it was the last thing I had wanted to do. At the end of that time and with Christmas drawing near, I returned to my parents' house: I was not going to permit Sally to upset my plan for a present way of life.

At intervals through the winter I peered at Sally's house from the corner of the cul-de-sac in which it stood, but never saw a sign of occupancy or change.

I had learned from Miss Garvice that Sally had simply "disappeared" from the Cottage Hospital.

"Disappeared?"

"Long before she was due for discharge, I need hardly say."

"How did it happen?"

"The night nurse was going her rounds and noticed that the bed was empty."

Miss Garvice was regarding me as if I were a material witness. Had we been in Miss Garvice's room at the hospital, Serena would have been asked to see that we were not disturbed.

Sally had not been back long enough to be much noticed in the town, and I observed that soon no one mentioned her at all.

Then, one day between Easter and Whitsun, I found she was at the front door.

"Hullo, Mel."

Again she was taking up the conversation. She was as until last autumn she had always been, with that strange, imperishable and untended prettiness of hers and her sweet, absent smile. She wore a white dress.

"Sally!" What could one say?

Our eyes met. She saw that she would have to come to the point.

"I've sold my house."

I kept my head. "I said it was too big for you. Come in."

She entered.

"I've bought a villa. In the Cyclades."

"For your work?"

She nodded. "The house fetched a price, of course. And my father left me more than I expected."

I said something banal.

Already she was lying on the big sofa and looking at me over the arm. "Mel, I should like you to come and stay with me. For a long time. As long as you can. You're a free agent, and you can't want to stay here."

Psychologists, I recollected, have ascertained that the comparative inferiority of women in contexts described as purely intellectual, is attributable to the greater discouragement and repression of their curiosity when children.

"Thank you, Sally. But I'm quite happy here, you know."

"You're not. Are you, Mel?"

"No. I'm not."

"Well, then?"

One day I shall probably go.

The Wine-Dark Sea (1966)

Off Corfu? Off Euboea? Off Cephalonia? Grigg would never say which it was. Beyond doubt it was an island relatively offshore from an enormously larger island which was relatively inshore from the mainland. On this bigger island was a town with a harbour, mainly for fishing-boats but also for the occasional caïque, and with, nowadays, also a big parking place for motor-coaches. From the waterfront one could see the offshore island, shaped like a whale with a building on its back, or, thought Grigg, like an elephant and castle.

Grigg had not come by motor-coach, and therefore had freedom to see the sights, such as they were; to clamber over the hot, rocky hills; and to sit at his ease every evening watching the splendid sunsets. He found the food monotonous, the noise incredible, and the women disappointing (in general, they seemed only to come to identity around the age of sixty, when they rapidly transmogrified into witches and seers); but drink was cheap and the distant past ubiquitous. The language was a difficulty, of course, but Grigg could still scramble a short distance on what remained to him of the ancient variety, which, now that a test had come, was more than he had supposed.

Most of the time it was straight, beating sunshine, something that had to be accommodated to by a steady act of will, like a Scandinavian winter (at least if there was any kind of serious enterprise on hand), but sometimes the air was green or blue or purple, and then the vast bay could be among the most beautiful places in the world, especially when the colour was purple. On his second or third evening, Grigg sat outside the café, an establishment patronised almost entirely by boring, noisy males, but unself-conscious and affable, none the less. He was drinking local drinks, and, despite the din, feeling himself almost to merge with the purple evening light. In the middle of the view appeared a smallish boat, with curving bow and stern, low freeboard, and a single square sail. If it had not risen from the depths, it must have sailed from behind the small offshore island. It seemed timeless in shape and handling. It added exactly the right kind of life to the sea, air, and evening.

But Grigg noticed at once that the other customers did not seem to think so. Not only did they stare at the beautiful boat, but they stared with expressions of direct hatred that an Englishman has no practice in adopting. They fell almost silent, which was a bad sign indeed. Even the white-coated waiters stopped running about and stood gazing out to sea like the customers. All that happened was that the boat put about and sailed on to the open waters. As she turned, Grigg thought that he could discern the shapes of sailors. They must have been good at their work, because the ship made off along a dead straight line in what seemed to Grigg to be very little breeze. Already she was merely a darker purple fleck in the perceptibly oncoming evening. The hubbub in the café soon worked up again. Grigg got the impression that the ship, though unpopular, was quite familiar.

Soon his waiter was removing his glass. Grigg ordered a renewel.

'What was that ship?'

He perceived that the waiter had a little English, but doubted whether it would suffice for this. It did suffice.

'She comes from the island.' The waiter stood gazing out, either at the ship or at the island.

'Can I visit the island?'

'No. There is no boat.'

'Surely I can hire one if I pay for it?'

'No. There is no boat.' And the waiter departed.

When he returned with Grigg's ensuing *ouzo*, Grigg did not resume the subject. All the same, what the waiter said had been absurd. The island could hardly have been more than a mile way and lay in the centre of the calm, sheltered bay. Grigg had not previously thought of the island as anything more than a point of emphasis in the view, an eye-catcher, as our ancestors termed it. Now he wanted to see more.

In the town was one of the state tourist offices, to which all foreign travellers are directed to go when in need. Grigg had not visited any of them before, but now was the time. He went next morning.

The pleasant young man who seemed in sole possession spoke pretty good English and received Grigg's enquiry with sophistication.

'The fishermen do not like the island,' he said, smiling. 'They give it, as you say, a wide berth.'

'Why is that?'

'It is said to be a very *old* island.'

'But surely this is a very old country?'

'Not as old as the island. Or so the fishermen say.'

'Is that a *bad* thing? Being very old?'

'Yes,' said the young man, with perceptibly less sophistication. 'A bad thing.' He sounded surprisingly firm. Grigg recollected that the tourist officials were recruited from the police.

'Then you think that no one will take me there?'

'I am sure of it,' said the young man, again smiling. 'No one.'

'Then I shall have to swim,' said Grigg. He spoke lightly, and he would have hated to have to do it. But the young man, who could not be sure of this, tried another tack.

'There's nothing to see on the island,' he said a shade anxiously. 'Nothing at all, I assure you. Let me give you our leaflet of tourist sights. All very nice.'

'Thank you,' said Grigg. 'I've got one already.'

The young man put the leaflet away, more obviously disappointed than an Englishman would have permitted of himself.

'Then you've been to the island yourself?' asked Grigg.

'No,' said the young man. 'As I told you, there is nothing to see.'

'Last night I saw a ship sail from the island. Either someone must live there or there must be some reason for going there.'

'I do not know about that,' said the young man, slightly sulky but still trying. 'I cannot imagine that anyone lives there or wants to go there.' Grigg could not suppose that this was to be interpreted quite literally.

'Why shouldn't they?'

'The Turks. The Turks made the island unlucky.'

Long before, Grigg had realised that throughout Hellas everything bad that cannot be attributed to the evil eye or other supernatural influence is blamed upon the Turks; even though the stranger is apt on occasion to suspect, however unworthily, that the Turks provided the last settled and secure government the region has known. And he had furthermore realised that it is a subject upon which argument is not merely useless but impossible. The Turks and their special graces have been expunged from Hellenic history; their mosques demolished or converted into cinemas.

'I see,' said Grigg. 'Thank you for your advice. But I must make it clear that I do not undertake to follow it.'

The young man smiled him out, confident that the local brick wall would fully withstand the pounding of Grigg's unbalanced and middle-aged head.

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And so it seemed. Contrary to legend, Grigg, as the day wore on, discovered that few of the fishermen seemed interested in his money: to be more precise, none of them, or none that he approached, and he had approached many. It did not seem to be that they objected to going to the island, because in most cases he had not reached the point of even mentioning the island: they simply did not want to take him anywhere, even

for what Grigg regarded as a considerable sum. They appeared to be very much preoccupied with their ordinary work. They would spend one entire day stretching their saffron-coloured nets to dry on the stones of the quay. Naturally the language barrier did not help, but Grigg got the impression that, in the view of the fishermen, as of various others he had met, tourists should adhere to their proper groove and not demand to wander among the real toilers, the genuine and living ancestors. Tourists were not to be comprehended among those strangers for whom, notoriously, the word is the same as for guests.

None of the separate, discouraging negotiations had taken long, and by the evening of that same day Grigg had combed the port and now found time on his hands. Thinking about it all, over an early drink, he wondered if word could have gone round as to the real destination of his proposed excursion. He also wondered if the island could be an enclave of the military, who were often to be found embattled in the most renowned and unexpected corners of the land. It seemed unlikely: the young man would have been proud to tell him so at once, as a young cowherd had told him at the ancient castro above Thessalonika. Besides, the ship he had seen could hardly have served for war since the Pericleans. It struck him to wonder whether the ship had returned during the night. He felt sure that it belonged to the island and not elsewhere. He even thought of buying a pair of field-glasses, but desisted because they would have to be carried all the way home.

Over his next *ouzo*, Grigg went on to consider why it mattered to him about reaching the island, especially when so much difficulty seemed to be involved. He decided that, in the first place, it had been the beautiful ship. In the second place, it had been the hostility to her of the people in the café. Grigg was one whose feelings were usually contrary to any that might be expressed in mass emotion; and he was confirmed in this when the popular feeling was so morally narrow and so uniform as, commonly, among the Hellenes. In the third place, it was undoubtedly the mysterious business about the island being bad because very old. A perceptive traveller in Hellas comes to think of the Parthenon as quite modern; to become more and more absorbed by what came earlier. Soon, if truly perceptive, he is searching seriously for centaurs.

All the same, Grigg quite surprised himself by what he actually did. Walking along the hard road in the heat of the next mid-afternoon, with almost no one else so foolish as to be about at all, apart from the usual discontented coach trip, he observed a small boat with an outboard motor. She was attached, bow on, to a ring. He could borrow her, visit the island, be back almost within an hour, and pay then, if anyone relevant had appeared. He was sure that it was now or never. He was able to untie the painter almost at his leisure, while the coach-party stared at him, welcoming the familiar activity and the familiar-looking man who was doing it. The engine started popping at the first pull. A miracle, thought Grigg, who had experience of outboards: fate is with me. In a matter of hardly more than seconds in all, his hand was on the helm and he was off.

To anyone that loves the seas of Britain or the great sands of Belgium and Holland, there is something faintly repulsive about the tideless Mediterranean and Aegean, which on a calm day tend to be at once stagnant and a little uncanny. Dense weed often clogs the shallows, uncleaned by ebb and flow; and one speculates upon fathom five and millennia many of unshifting spoil. While he was still near the shore, Grigg's enjoyment was mitigated also by the smell, much more noticeable than from the land; but soon the pleasure of being afloat at all worked on him, and within minutes there was nothing in his heart but the sun, the breeze, the parting of the water at the prow of the boat, and the island ahead. After a spell, he did half look over his shoulder for a possible gesticulating figure on the quay. There was no one. Even the coach-party was re-embarked and poised to go elsewhere. And soon the lights that sparkled on the miniature waves were like downland flowers in spring.

Upon a closer view, the building on the island's back proved to be merely the central section, or keep, of saffron-coloured fortifications that included the whole area. In view of what the man at the tourist office had said, they had presumably been erected by the Turks, but one never quite knew whether there had not been contributions from the Venetians, or the Normans, or the Bulgars, or the Cyclops, or, at different times, from them all. Some of the present structures seemed far gone in decay, but all of them were covered with clusters and swags of large, brightly coloured flowers, so that the total effect was quite dazzling, especially when seen across a few

hundred yards of radiant blue sea. Grigg perceived that the island was simply a rock; a dark brown, or reddish brown rock, which stood out everywhere quite distinctly from the lighter hue of the stonework.

Then he saw that the sunlight was glinting on glass in at least some of the windows, small and deepset though they were. To his right, moreover, an ornamental balustrade, hardly a part of the fortress, descended the sloping back of the island until it ended almost at sea-level. Grigg thought that the rock might continue to slope in the same gentle degree under the water, so that it would be as well to go cautiously and to keep well out; but it seemed, none the less, the likeliest end of the island for a landing. He rounded the island in this way without incident, and saw that on the far side there was a square stone harbour, though void alike of craft and citizens. He cut off his noisy engine and drifted in. He marvelled more than ever at the number, the size, and the gorgeousness of the flowers. Already, still out at sea, he could even smell them: not the smell of one particular species, but a massed perfume, heavy and almost melodious, drifting across the limpid water to meet and enfold him. He sailed silently in like a coasting bird, and settled perfectly at the harbour steps, as one commonly does when not a soul is looking. Grigg sprang ashore, climbed the steps, which were made of marble, and made fast to one of the rings in the stonework at the top. He observed that here the ocean-verge was uncluttered with weed, so that he could look downwards many yards through the water and the shoals of fish to the sunny sand below.

Having but borrowed the boat, he meant, of course, to remain for only a matter of minutes; merely to make up his mind as to whether there was anything on the island to justify the difficulty of a renewed effort for a more conventional visit. At once, however, he realized how glad he was to be alone, how greatly a professional boatman would have spoiled his pleasure.

On this side of the long sloping balustrade were wide steps; a marble staircase leading from port to citadel. They were immaculate: even, level, and almost polished in their smoothness. Grigg ascended. On his right was the bare brown rock. He noticed that it was strikingly rough and gnarled, with hardly anywhere a flat area as big as a lace handkerchief. He put his hand on this rough rock. It was so hot that it almost burnt him. Still, soil had

come from somewhere: as well as the wonderful flowers, there were fruit trees ahead and heavy creepers. Curiously coloured lizards lay about the steps watching him. He could not quite name the colour. Azure, perhaps; or cerulean. When he reached the citadel, there were nectarines hanging from the branches spread out against the yellow walls. They seemed much ahead of their time, Grigg thought, but supposed that so far south the seasons were different. He was feeling more and more a trespasser. The island was quite plainly inhabited and cared for. There was nothing about it which accorded with the impression given at the tourist office.

The citadel had wooden gates, but they were open. Grigg hesitated. There was nothing to be heard but the soft sea and the bees. He listened, and entered the citadel.

The structure ranged round three sides of a stone-paved courtyard. The fourth side, which faced away from the bigger island, had either fallen or been bombarded into ruin, and then perhaps been demolished, so that now there was nothing left but high, rough edges of yellow masonry framing the view of the open sea, vast, featureless, and the colour of the sky. Again there were flowers everywhere, with a big flowering tree near the centre of the court. The glazed windows stood open, and so did several doors. Grigg did not care to enter: the place was clearly lived in, and he had no justification for being there.

Still he did not feel as yet like returning.

On the far side of the courtyard was another open gateway. Grigg passed cautiously through it. There seemed nothing to worry about. As usual, no one was to be seen. There were not even the farm animals he had half expected. There was nothing but a tangle of collapsed defence structures from past centuries, starting with an irregular wall which ringed this entire end of the island at little above sea-level. Between the many ruined buildings was dense, sharp grass, reaching above Grigg's knees, and unpleasantly suggestive also of snakes. None the less, he ploughed on, convinced by now that this was his only chance, as he would never be able to find a reason for coming back.

A considerable garrison must have been installed at one time, or at least contemplated. The place was still like a maze, and also gave the impression, even now, of having been abandoned quite suddenly, doubtless when the Turks departed. There were still long guns, mounted and pointed out to sea, though drawn back. There were straggling, dangerous stacks of stone, and other obviously ancient heaps that might once have been heaps of anything. Grigg was far too hot and increasingly lacerated, but he determined to scramble on, as there was a circular tower at the end of the island, which, if climbable, might offer a more revealing panorama. Anyway, who that had imagination, could reach the island in the way Grigg had reached it, and not at least try to climb that tower?

When at long last attained, the tower seemed to be in almost perfect order. Grigg dragged open the parched door, and wound his way up and up through the spiders and other crepusculæ. The circular stone stair emerged through a now uncovered hole in the stone roof, so that the top steps were shapeless and treacherous beneath deep, lumpy silt which had drifted in from the atmosphere.

And then there was a revelation indeed. As Grigg emerged and looked out over the low battlements, he saw on the instant that another boat had entered the small harbour, almost a ship; in fact, without doubt, *the* ship. She was painted green, and her single blue sail had already been struck. Grigg perceived that now he could hardly depart from the island without explanations.

He descended the tower, not having studied the other features of the prospect as carefully as he otherwise would have done. As he stumbled back through the débris and thick, dry vegetation, he grazed and sliced himself even more than on the outward scramble. He felt very undignified as he re-entered the citadel, especially as he was hotter than ever.

Standing in the courtyard were three women. They all appeared to be aged between thirty and forty, and they all wore identical greeny-brown dresses, plainly intended for service.

'Good afternoon,' said one of the women. 'Do you wish to stay with us?' She had a foreign accent, but it struck Grigg at once as not being Greek.

'Can one stay?' It was a foolish rejoinder, but instinctual.

'We do not run an hotel, but we sometimes have guests. It is as you wish.'

'I am staying in the town. I couldn't find out anything about the island, so I borrowed a boat to see for myself.'

'How did you do that?' asked one of the other women, in what seemed to Grigg to be the same foreign accent. She had dark hair, where the other two were fair, and a darker voice than the first speaker.

'Do what?'

'Borrow a boat. They would never lend you a boat to come here.'

'No,' said Grigg, certain that he was blushing under the singularly direct gaze of his interrogator's black eyes. 'It was difficult.' After pausing for a second, he took a small plunge. 'Why should that be?'

'The Greeks are stupid,' said the first woman. 'Violent and vengeful, of course, too; quite incapable of government; but, above all, stupid. They can't even grow a tree. They can only cut them down.' She placed her hand on the bole of the beautiful flowering tree which grew in the courtyard. It was a rather fine movement, Grigg thought, much more like the Greeks of myth than any of the Greeks he could remember actually to have seen.

'They certainly seem to have a particular feeling about this island.'

No further explanation was forthcoming. There was merely another slight pause. Then the first woman spoke.

'Do *you* have any particular feeling about this island?'

'I think it is the most beautiful place I have ever visited,' replied Grigg, hardly knowing whether or not he exaggerated.

'Then stay with us.'

'I have to take back the boat. As I said, I have only borrowed it.'

The third woman spoke for the first time. 'I shouldn't take back the boat.' She spoke with the same accent as the others, and her tone was one of pleasant warning.

'What do you mean?' asked Grigg.

'You'll be torn to pieces if you do.'

'Oh, surely not,' said Grigg, laughing uneasily.

'Didn't you steal the boat?' The woman was smiling quite amicably. 'Or at least borrow it without asking?'

'As a matter of fact, yes.'

'And haven't you borrowed it so as to come here?'

'Yes.'

'They'll tear you to pieces.' She spoke as if it were the most foregone of conclusions; but, seeing that Grigg still doubted, she added in friendly seriousness, 'Believe it. It's true. If you leave us, you can't go back. You'll have to go somewhere else. A long way off.'

Inevitably, Grigg was impressed. 'But tell me,' he said, 'why shouldn't I – or anyone else – come here?'

The woman with the black eyes looked hard at Grigg. 'They believe we're sorcerers – sorcer*esses*,' she corrected herself, tripping over the language.

Grigg was familiar with such talk among southern peasants. 'And are you?' he asked lightly.

'Yes,' said the dark woman. 'We are.'

'Yes,' confirmed the first woman. 'We are all sorceresses.' There was about about the statement neither facetiousness nor challenge.

'I see,' said Grigg gravely; and looked away from them out to the open ocean, empty as before.

'People who come her usually know that already,' said the first woman; again in some simple explanation.

Grigg turned back to them and stared for a moment. They really were, he realised, most striking to see, all three of them: with beautifully shaped, muscular, brown limbs; strong necks and markedly sculptural features; and a casual grandeur of posture, which was perhaps the most impressive thing of all. And their practical, almost primitive, garments suited them wonderfully. The two fair women wore yellow shoes, but the dark woman was bare-footed, with strong, open toes. Grigg was struck by a thought.

'Yesterday I saw your ship,' he said. 'In a way, it was why I came. Do you sail her yourself?'

'Yes,' said the first woman. 'We have sometimes to buy things, and they will sell us nothing here. We built the boat on a beach in Albania, where no one lives. We took wood from the forests behind, which belong to no one.'

'I believe that now they belong to the People's Republic,' Grigg said, smiling.

'That is the same thing,' said the woman.

'I suspect that you are right about my little boat,' said Grigg. 'They tell you to act more regularly on impulse, but I often act on impulse, and almost always find that it was a mistake, sometimes a surprisingly bad one.'

'Coming here was not necessarily a mistake,' said the first woman. 'It depends.'

'I wasn't thinking about that part of it,' said Grigg, convicted of rudeness. 'I like it here. I was thinking of what will happen when I go back – whenever I go back.'

'One of us will guide you to somewhere you'll be safe. Now, if you wish.'

'Thank you,' said Grigg. 'But I only borrowed the boat and must really return it.'

'Take it back during the night,' said the third woman, with unexpected practicality.

And thus it was that Grigg decided to stay; at least until it was dark.

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There was work to be done: first, the unloading of the ship. Grigg naturally offered to help, but the women seemed very cool about it.

'The tasks are disposed for the three of us,' said the woman who had spoken first, 'and you would find it very hot.'

Grigg could not deny this last statement, as he was already perspiring freely, though standing still. None the less, he could hardly leave it at that.

'As you are permitting me to intrude upon you,' he said, 'please permit me to help.'

'You are not an intruder,' said the woman, 'but you are a stranger, and the tasks are for me and my sisters.'

She made Grigg feel so completely unqualified that he could think of nothing to say. 'The house is open to you,' continued the woman. 'Go wherever you like. The heat is not good unless you are accustomed to it.' The three women then went out through the harbour gateway and down the long flight of marble steps to the ship. Grigg looked after them as they descended, but none of them looked back.

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Grigg entered through one of the doors and began to prowl about. There were many rooms, some big, some small, but all well proportioned. All were painted in different colours, all perfectly clean, all open to the world, and all empty. The whole place was beautifully tended, but it was hard to see for what, at least by accepted standards.

Grigg ascended to the floor above. The marble staircase led to a landing from which was reached a larger and higher room than any of the others. It had doubtless been the main hall of the citadel. Three tall windows opened on to small decorative balconies overlooking the courtyard. On a part of the floor against the wall opposite these windows were rectangular cushions packed together like mah-jong pieces, to make an area of softness. There were smaller windows high in the wall above them. There was nothing else in the room but a big circular bowl of flowers. It stood on the floor towards one corner, and had been hewn from pink marble. Grigg thought that the combined effect of the cushions, the flowers, and the proportions of the room was one of extreme luxury. The idea came to him, not for the first time, that most of the things which people buy in the belief that they are luxuries are really poor substitutes for luxury.

The other rooms on that floor of the citadel were as the rooms below, spotless, sunny, but empty. On the second floor there were several rooms furnished as the hall; with in one place a mass of deep cushions, in another a mass of flowers, and nothing else. Sometimes the flowers were in big iron bowls mounted on tripods; sometimes in reservoirs forming a part (but the dominant part) of a statuary group. On the first and second floors, the rooms led into one another, and most of them had windows, overlooking the larger island from which Grigg had come, the other overlooking the open sea. It was true that there were doors, in coloured wood; but all, without exception, stood open. There was nothing so very unusual about the building, agreeable though it was, and nothing in the least mysterious in themselves about its appurtenances, but before Grigg had completed his tour and emerged on to the flat roof, he had begun to feel quite depressed by the recollection of how he and his neighbours dwelt, almost immersed beneath mass-produced superfluities, impotent even as distractions.

On the roof was a single stone figure of a recumbent man, more than life-size. It reposed at one end of the roof with its back to the harbour, and it was from the other end of the roof that Grigg first saw it, so that he had a longish walk across the bare expanse before he came up to it, like a visitor to Mussolini in the great days.

The figure was, inevitably, of the kind vaguely to be termed classical; but Grigg doubted whether, in any proper sense, it was classical at all. It was not so much that it was in perfect order, as if it had been carved that same year, and glossy of surface, both of which things are rare with ancient sculpture, but rather the sentiment with which the figure was imbued, and which it projected as an aura, the compulsive implication of the artist's work, if indeed there had ever been an artist.

It was a male of advanced years, or alternatively, perhaps, ageless, who reclined with his head on his right hand which rose from the elbow on the ground, a position which Grigg had always found to be especially uncomfortable. The hair straggled unkempt over the low cranium. The big eyes protruded above the snub nose, and from the thick lips the tongue protruded slightly also. There was a lumpy chin, unconcealed by a beard. The rest of the body was hirsute, long-armed, and muscular; hands, feet, and phallus being enormous. The man appeared to be lying on the bare and wrinkled earth; or possibly, it struck Grigg, on rocks. The folds in the stone ground of the statue (it seemed to be some other stone than the usual marble) were very similar to the folds in the rock which he had noticed as he walked up from the harbour. There was something compressed and drawn together about the man's entire attitude, almost like a foetus in the womb, or an immensely strong spring, compressed against the moment of use. Grigg thought that the man did not much stare at him, though staring he certainly was, as right through him and beyond him, probably far beyond. As Grigg gazed back, a small spurt of dirty water bubbled from the man's open mouth. It dribbled from his tongue and discoloured the forearm supporting his head. There must have been a pump to supply the fountain, and Grigg was not surprised, considering the obvious mechanical problems, that it did not work very well.

Grigg advanced to the balustrade surrounding the citadel roof and looked over the harbour. The women were still at work unloading the ship. One of them, the smaller of the two with fair hair, who had been the last to speak when Grigg appeared, was carrying up the wide steps a large green cask, mounted on her right shoulder.

Grigg felt very uncertain what to do. He could hardly just stand about while the women were working so industriously, but he felt that the rejection of his services had been singularly final, and he also felt that if he succeeded in insisting, then he would almost certainly make a fool of himself in the great heat and with a routine of which he was ignorant. He had nothing even to read, nor had he seen anything to read on the entire island. He decided, pusillanimously, to stay where he was, until things below perhaps quieted down.

He sank upon the stones of the roof at a place where the balustrade gave a little shade. He had in mind to stretch out for a siesta, but the stones were so hard and so level that he found himself propping his head on his hand, like the stone man he had just been looking at. He gazed out to sea between the columns of the balustrade, but the attitude soon proved every bit as uncomfortable as he had always thought, and he began instead to sprawl upon his back, pushed as close against the balustrade as he could manage, in the need for as much shade as possible. He reflected that again he was imitating the stone man, so drawn in on himself.

It was, in any case, quite useless, and, like most useless things, useless almost immediately. Not only was the sun unbearable, but the stored heat of the stone was even more unbearable and worse even than its hardness, though stone is harder in the Hellenes than anywhere else. After only a few minutes, Grigg felt as stiff and parched as an old tobacco leaf; so much so that he had difficulty in rising to his feet, and was glad that his middle-aged muddling, the dropsy of a welfare society, was not under observation.

He descended to the floor below and sank himself on the cushioned area in one of the luxurious rooms; he neither knew nor cared which. Through the open windows had flown in some very tiny, curiously coloured birds. Grigg could not quite name the colour: some kind of bright blue, aquamarine perhaps. The birds fluttered immoderately, like moths; and, from their throats or wings or both, came a faint, high, silvery, unceasing chant, as of honey heard dripping from the very summit of Hymettus. Grigg normally liked a bird in the room no more than other men like it; but all he did about the birds now was fall dead asleep.

At some time during his sleep, he had a nightmare. He dreamed that lizards, not small blue ones, but quite large black ones, possibly eighteen inches long, were biting off his own flesh. Already they had devoured most of the flesh on his feet and legs, so that he could see the bare, red bones extending upwards to the knees. It was difficult to look, however. There was something in common between his attitude, lying uncomfortably on his back, and the attitude he had been forced into on the roof. He did not seem to be tied down in any way, or even drugged, but he was too stiff to move very much, none the less. Gnawing away even now were eight or ten lizards, with long angular legs, big clawed feet, and oversized necks, heads, and eyes; and there were many other similar lizards, standing silently in the background, a terrifying number, in fact. Perhaps they are waiting their turn, Grigg thought; and then remembered that it was something which animals are seldom observed to do. One curious thing was that the gnawing did not exactly hurt: it was quite perceptible, but Grigg felt it as a nervous *frisson* charging his whole body, half painful but half pleasurable, like a mild current of electricity from a machine on the pier. Grigg could not decide whether or not he was wearing clothes. When he looked, he could see his bare legs (very bare in fact); while, at the same time, he *felt* as if he were fully dressed. But, then again, the lizards had already pecked at other patches of his body. He trembled to think what it would be like when they reached his head.

But before they did, Grigg was awake, or, rather, awakened.

The scene seemed hardly less strange, because there were several things to be taken in at once.

In the first place, the whole room was filled with a dim and dusky red light, which Grigg soon realised was probably just the last of the sunset, suggesting that he had slept a long time.

In the second place, the room seemed to be what he could only regard as moving about. There was a steady pitching, up, down, up; and with it was incorporated a sick-making diagonal tilt. It was by no means a single lurch, but a persistent, though far from regular, heaving and plunging.

'An earthquake,' cried Grigg very loudly to the twilight; now much more fully awake.

He tried to leap up, but then realised a third thing: in some way he was being restrained.

He awoke completely. There was a weight on his chest, and bonds round his arms. He perceived that it was a human being who was imprisoning him, holding him down.

It was one of the three women. She lifted her head, though without releasing him, and he perceived that it was the woman he had last seen carrying the green cask on her shoulder up the steps.

'It will end,' she said. 'Lie still and it will be over.'

'It *is* an earthquake?' enquired Grigg in a whisper.

'Yes,' she said. 'An earthquake.' Her tonelessness was probably deliberate and intended to reassure. She tightened her hold on him, and as she moved her head, he felt her hair against his face in the near darkness.

'What's your name?' asked Grigg in the same whisper.

'My name is Tal.'

'You are beautiful.'

'You are strong.'

Grigg had not, before she spoke, felt at all strong.

'I could hardly hold you.' She spoke as if she had saved him from some great peril.

'I was dreaming. I still am dreaming.'

'Then I am part of the dream.'

'The whole island is a dream but it is a very lovely island.'

'It is an island of love.'

Suddenly he realised that she was naked.

The last of the sunset, setting fire to his body, kindled it into a blaze. The two of them rolled onto the warm floor.

'It is my first earthquake,' he said. 'I always thought earthquakes were bad.'

And in a few flushed minutes before it was absolutely and finally dark, in that region where darkness comes quickly, he had possessed her, with uttermost rapture, a rapture not previously imaginable.

*

He heard her voice through the darkness speaking, he divined, from the doorway. She sounded as cool as the night was still warm.

'There is a meal.'

'I am hungry for it.'

The earthquake had ended. It was as if they two had ended it.

'Can you find your way down without a light?'

'I'm sure I can.' After all, she had given him the eyes of a cat, of a muscular, blonde cat.

'We eat in the courtyard.'

'I could devour an ox,' commented Grigg happily, and abandoning all restraint.

'We eat fruit,' she said, and he could hear her leaving him through the darkness.

'Tal!' he cried after her, but softly. He wanted to kiss her, to ravish her again, but she did not return.

*

There she was, however, eating nectarines with the others, as soon as he had groped his way down. There were grapes, nuts, and oranges, not in dishes but strewn with the nectarines about the stones of the court. Grigg thought it was just as if all the fruit had been scattered from a cornucopia. There were also a whole chest of figs and heavy lumps of small dates in a big brown canvas bag. The three women had brought out cushions and were eating in what is supposed to have been the Roman style. There were cushions for Grigg too, and soon he was peeling an orange. The sky was now full of stars.

'I am Lek,' said the other fair woman.

'I am Vin,' said the dark woman. She was still bare-footed, Grigg noticed.

As Tal said nothing, Grigg wondered how much was known.

'I am Grigg.'

'Be welcome, Grigg,' said Lek, the woman who had spoken to him first, that afternoon in this same courtyard; 'be assured of all our loves.'

'Thank you,' replied Grigg. 'I am happy.'

Vin threw him a nut; or rather, if he had not been able to see her warm smile in the now clear starlight, he might have supposed that she had thrown a nut at him, so hard did it hit. What was more, he noticed that there were no nutcrackers and no substitute for them. The women split the nuts open by biting them, which was entirely beyond him to do. It was quite a serious matter, because he really could not subsist entirely on fruit. He had, after all, eaten nothing since breakfast. However, he looked with surreptitious meaning at Tal, and felt compensated but less than reassured. Moreover, the night, instead of growing cooler, seemed to be growing steadily warmer.

'Don't earthquakes usually do damage?' he asked.

'Elsewhere they do,' replied Lek, splintering a nut. 'Not here.'

'Our earthquakes are not like other people's earthquakes,' said Vin. She did not say it banteringly, but rather as if to discourage further questions. She too, was carefully picking scraps of nut from splinters of shell.

'I see,' said Grigg. 'Or rather, I don't see at all.'

'We do not claim to be like other people in any way,' explained Lek. 'As I told you, we are sorceresses.'

'I remember,' said Grigg. 'What exactly does that mean?'

'It is not to be described,' said Lek.

'I feared as much,' said Grigg, glancing again at Tal, who so far had not spoken at all.

'You misunderstand,' said Lek. 'I mean that the description would be without meaning. The thing can only be felt, experienced. It is not a matter of conjuring, of turning lead into gold, or wine into blood. We can do all those things as well, but they are bad and to be avoided, or left behind.'

'I think I have heard something of the kind,' said Grigg. 'I am sorry to be inquisitive. All the same, it might have been nice if you could have prevented that earthquake.'

'There was no reason to prevent it.'

'Sorry,' said Grigg, tired of the mystification. 'It is none of my business, anyway.'

'That depends,' said Lek.

'Upon whether you decide to stay or go,' said Vin. As she spoke, she took off her plain, greeny-brown dress. She did it casually, as a woman might remove a scarf when she finds it too hot. Vin was wearing no other

garment, and now lay naked on the cushions, her back against the low wall, behind which stretched the sea.

'On this island,' continued Lek, 'we live as all people once lived. But long ago they thought better of it and started looking for something else. They have been looking, instead of living, ever since.'

'What have they been looking for?'

'They call it achievement. They call it knowledge. They call it mastery. They even call it happiness. You called it happiness just now, when Vin threw a nut at you, but we are prepared to treat that as a slip of the tongue by a newcomer. And do you know who started it all?'

'I would rather you told me.'

'The Greeks started it. It was their stupidity. Have you not seen how stupid the Greeks are?'

'As a matter of fact, I have. It is not at all what one is led to expect. I have been continuously surprised by it.'

'Nothing to be surprised at. It is the same quality that made the Greeks separate man from nature in the first place, or rather from life.'

'You mean the ancient Greeks?' asked Grigg, staring at her.

'The same Greeks. All Greeks are the same. All stupid. All lopsided. All poisoned with masculinity.'

'Yes,' said Grigg, smiling. 'As a matter of fact, I have noticed something like that. It is not a country for women.' His eyes drifted to Vin's naked body, gleaming in the starlight.

'Once it was. We ruled once, but they drove us out,' said Lek, more sadly than fiercely. 'We fought, and later they wrote silly plays about the fight, but they defeated us, though not by the superior strength on which they pride themselves so much.'

'How, then?'

'By changing our world into a place where it was impossible for us to live. It was impossible for them to live in such a world also, but that they were too stupid to know. They defeated us in the same way that they have defeated everything else that is living,'

'Tell me,' said Grigg. 'What makes you think that I am any different? After all, I am a man, even though not a Greek. Why on earth should I be any kind of an exception?'

'There is no earth here,' said Lek. 'Haven't you noticed?'

'Nothing but rock,' cried Grigg. 'But there are more flowers than anywhere? And these wonderful nectarines?'

'They live on rock,' said Tal, speaking for the first time.

'You are different,' said Lek, 'simply because you have both set out and arrived. Few try and fewer succeed.'

'What happens to them?'

'They have set-backs of various kinds.'

'I didn't find it in the least difficult,' said Grigg.

'Those meant to succeed at a thing never do find the thing difficult.'

'Meant? Meant by whom?'

'By the life of which they are a part, whether they know it or not.'

'It is very mystical,' said Grigg. 'Where is this life to be found?'

'Here,' said Lek, simply. 'And it is not mystical at all. That is a word invented by those who have lost life or destroyed it. A word like *tragedy.* The stupid Greeks even called the plays they wrote about their fight with the women, *tragedies.'*

'If I stay,' began Grigg, and then stopped. 'If I stay,' he began again, 'how do I make payment? I do not necessarily mean in money. All the same, how?'

'Here there are no bargains and no debts. You do not pay at all. You submit to the two gods. Their rule is light, but people are so unaccustomed to it that they sometimes find it includes surprises.'

'I have seen one of the gods. Where is the other?'

'The other god is female and therefore hidden.'

Grigg noticed that a considerable tremor, very visible in the case of Vin, passed through all three of their bodies.

'I still do not understand,' he said, 'why there is no one else. We are not all that far away. And the voyage is really quite easy. I should have thought that people would be coming all the time.'

'It might be better,' said Lek, 'to rejoice that you are the one chosen. But if you wish to go, go now, and one of us will guide you.'

*

Grigg didn't go. It wasn't Lek's riddling talk that prevented him, but much simpler things: Tal; the charm and strangeness of the empty rooms; not least the conviction that the women were right when they said he could not return to his starting-point, and uncertainty as to where else he could practicably make for. He told them that he would stay for the night. A plan would be easier to evolve in the sunshine.

'You don't mind if I grow a beard?' he said. 'I've brought nothing with me.'

They were very nice about his having brought nothing with him.

'Enchanted islands are hard to understand,' he said. 'I've always thought that. It worried me even as a child. The trouble is that you can never be sure where the enchantment begins and where it ends.'

'You learn by experience,' said Tal.

'Do you – do we – really live entirely on fruit?'

'No,' said Lek. 'There is wine.'

Vin rose and walked out through the gateway that led down to the harbour. She moved like a nymph, and her silhouette against the night sky through the arch was that of a girl-athlete on a vase.

Wine was not the sustenance that Grigg, fond though he was of it, felt he most needed at the moment, but he said nothing. They were all silent while waiting for Vin to return. The tideless waves flapped against the surrounding rock. The stars flickered.

Vin returned with a little porcelain bowl, not spilling a drop of the contents as she stepped bare-footed over the uneven stones. The bowl was set among them, small cups appeared, and they all drank. There was little wine left when all the cups had been filled. The wine was red. Grigg thought it was also extremely sweet and heavy, almost treacly in texture; he was glad that he did not have to drink more of it. They followed the wine by drinking water from a pitcher.

'Where do you find water?' asked Grigg.

'From springs in the rock,' answered Lek.

'More than one spring?'

'There is a spring of health, a spring of wisdom, a spring of beauty, a spring of logic, and a spring of longevity.'

'And the water we are drinking?'

'It is from the spring of salutation. Alas, we do not drink from it as often as we should like.'

Here Tal departed and came back with the green cask which Grigg had earlier seen her carrying. It contained a different wine, and, to Grigg, a more accustomed.

Tal had also brought a lantern. They settled to ancient games with coloured stones, and lines drawn with charcoal on the rocky floor. These games again were new to Grigg: not only their rules and skills, but, more, the spirit in which they were played. The object appeared to be not so much individual triumph as an intensification of fellow-feeling; of love, to use Lek's word of welcome to him. Most surprising of all to Grigg was the discovery that he no longer felt underfed, although he had eaten neither meat nor grain. He felt agog (it was the only word) with life, air, warmth, and starlight. Time itself had become barbless and placid.

'Sleep where you will,' said Lek. 'There are many rooms.' Vin picked up her dress and they all entered the citadel.

'Good night,' they said.

'He tried to catch Tal's eye, but failed.

They were gone.

Grigg did not feel like sleep. He decided to walk down to the harbour.

The lizards were still sprawling and squirming on the steps, which Grigg thought odd for such creatures, and unpleasingly reminiscent of his dream. The scent of the massed flowers was heavier than ever. He went slowly down through the stars and the blossoms, and climbed aboard his boat, now lying alongside the much bigger sailing-ship; looked at the engine, which appeared to be untouched (though he could think of no real reason why it should be otherwise); and sat on the stern seat thinking.

He decided that though the way of life on the island seemed to him in almost every way perfect, he was far from sure that he himself was so innately the designated participant in it as to justify his apparently privileged journey and landfall. He was far from pleased by this realisation. On the contrary, he felt that he had been corrupted by the very different life to which he had been so long accustomed, and much though he normally disliked it. He doubted whether by now he was capable of redemption from that commonplace existence, even by enchantment. The three women had virtually agreed that enchantment has its limitations. Grigg felt very much

like starting the outboard forthwith, and making off to face the difficult music.

'Be brave.'

Grigg looked up. It was Vin who had spoken. She had resumed her dress and was leaning over the gunwale of the ship above him.

'But what does courage consist in? Which is the brave thing to do?'

'Come up here,' said Vin, 'and we'll try to find out.'

Grigg climbed the narrow harbour steps, walked round the end of the little basin, and stepped over the side of the curved ship. Vin had now turned and stood with her back against the opposite side, watching him. Grigg was quite astonished by how beautiful she looked, though he could hardly see her face through the darkness. It mattered little: Vin, standing there alone, was superb. She seemed to him the living epitome of the elegant ship.

'We don't really exist, you know,' said Vin. 'So, in the first place, you need not be scared of us. We're only ghosts. Nothing to be frightened of.'

He sat on a coil of rope in front of her, but a little to the side, the harbour-mouth side.

'Do you chuck about ropes like this?'

'Of course. We're strong.'

'Do you eat absolutely nothing but fruit?'

'And drink the wine I brought you to drink.'

'I thought it was no ordinary wine.'

'It makes you no ordinary person.'

'I don't feel very different.'

'People don't feel very different even after they have died. The Greek Church says that forty days pass before people feel any different.'

'Is that true?'

'Quite true. Not even the Greeks are wrong all the time. And the dead still feel the same even *after* forty days unless the proper masses are said. You can't go to Heaven without the masses, you know.'

'Or, presumably, to Hell?'

'As you say, Grigg.'

Grigg was struck by a thought.

'Is that in some way why you're here now?'

Vin laughed, gurgling like her own thick, sweet, red wine. 'No, Grigg. We're not dead. Feel.'

She held out her left hand. Grigg took it. It was curiously firm and soft at the same time, strong but delicate. Grigg found himself most reluctant to relinquish it.

'You're alive,' said Grigg.

Vin said nothing.

'Tell me,' said Grigg, 'what there is in the wine?'

'Rock,' said Vin softly.

Grigg was absurdly reminded of those claims in wine-merchants' catalogues that in this or that brand can be tasted the very soil in which it was grown.

'Don't laugh,' said Vin, quite sharply. 'The rock doesn't like it.'

Grigg had no idea what she meant, but he stopped laughing at once. The mystery made her words all the more impressive, as sometimes when an

adult admonishes a child.

'Where did you all come from?' asked Grigg. 'To judge by what you say, you can't be Greek. And you don't sound Greek. You speak English beautifully, which means you can't be English. What are you?'

'Lek comes from one place. Tal from another. I from a third. Where I come from the people wear no shoes.'

'Lek spoke of you as sisters.'

'We are sisters. We work and fight side by side, which makes us sisters.'

'Are there no more of you?'

'Men have broken through from time to time, like you. The rock is surrounded, you know. But none of the men have stayed. They have killed themselves or sailed away.'

'Have none of them sailed back? After all, it's not far.'

'Not one. They have always had something to make it impossible. Like your stolen boat.'

'I suppose that's inevitable. One couldn't think of finding a place like this and still being able to go back.' He thought about it, then added, 'or forward either, I daresay.'

'Grigg,' said Vin, 'burn your boat. I will make fire for you.'

The shock of her words made him rise to his feet, charged with the instinct of flight.

On the instant her arms were round him, holding him very tightly. 'Burn it, burn it,' she was crying passionately. 'Will you never understand? You might have done it hours ago.'

Without thinking of what he was doing, he found that his arms were round her too, and they were kissing.

'Watch me make fire,' she shouted. In the instant they had become lovers, true lovers, sentiment as well as passion, tender as well as proud.

She darted across the ship, leapt the gunwale, and ran round the little quay, all the while dragging Grigg by the hand. She seemed to part the thin painter with a single pull and drew the boat out of the basin. Despite the absence of tide or wind, the boat drifted straight out into the darkness of the open sea.

'Day and night, the sea runs away from the rock,' cried Vin.

They stood together, their arms tightly round one another's waists, watching the boat disappear.

Grigg could not sense that she did anything more, but suddenly, far out, there was a beautiful rosy glow, like the sunset, it was contained and oval, and in the middle of it could be seen the transfigured outline of the boat, gleaming whitely, like the Holy Grail, too bright to stare at for more than a moment. Outside the fiery oval, the whole air was turning a faint, deep pink.

'My God,' cried Grigg, 'the petrol in the outboard. It will explode.'

'On to the ship,' said Vin, and hauled him back round the basin and aboard.

They hid, clinging together, in a small hold made simply by thick planks stretched at gunwale-level across the bow. The flush in the night sky was intensifying all the time. Then there was a loud concussion; the sky turned almost scarlet; and, not more than a few minutes later, he possessed Vin as if she had been hardly more than a little girl.

*

Hand in hand, they ascended the wide steps to the citadel. At the gateway, they looked back. The burning boat had still not sunk, because it could just be seen, a faint horizontal cinder, drifting into the blackness. The pink in the air was once more faint, and apparently turning to silver.

'The moon,' said Vin. 'The moon is drawing near and shining through the water.'

'The flowers go to meet the moon even more eagerly than the sun. You can hear them. Listen, Vin.'

They stood in silence.

'Sleep with me, Vin.'

'We sleep apart.'

It was as Tal had said 'We eat fruit'. And it proved to be equally true.

*

He stole through the empty rooms, seeing no one. Now very tired, he lowered himself on to a pile of cushions, but not the pile on which he had lain with Tal, and not in the same room.

None the less, he could not easily sleep. It came to him with a nervous shock, as happens after long absorption, to recall that, only that same morning, the island, the rock, as the women always named it, had been no more than an obsessive premonition, he no other than an ordinary mortal, eternally going through the motions. He felt now that in the very moment he had first sighted the rock, he had begun to change. And there was almost certainly no going back; not just in symbol or allegory, but in hard, practical terms, as the world deems them.

Grigg lay listening to the lapping, trickling waves; smelling the night flowers. Was it never cooler or colder than this? Never?

*

Grigg would not have believed it possible, as he reflected on his third morning, that he could live so happily without occupation. There were a few jobs to be done, but so far the women had done all of them, and Grigg had felt no real compunction, as the jobs had seemed to be as complete a part of their lives as breathing – and as automatic and secondary. There had

been almost nothing else: no reading, no struggling with the environment, no planning. Grigg had always truly believed that he, like others, would be lost without tasks; that pleasures pall; and that ease exhausts. Now he was amazed not only by the change in his philosophy, but by the speed with which it had come about. Obviously, one had to say, it was far, far too soon to be sure; but Grigg felt that obviousness of that kind was, as far as he was concerned, already a thing of the past. Indeed, nothing, probably nothing at all, was obvious any more. Perhaps it was that Tal and Vin had purged him of the obvious within little more than his first twelve hours on the island.

Not that anything of that kind had so far happened again. Vin had withdrawn into an attitude of loving casualness, as Tal had done: the attitude which characterised all three of the women, and which Grigg found especially charming, so that he had not even made any serious attempt to intensify things with either of them.

Later that day, the-three women had been singing. Now there was a pause, while they all lay listening to the waves and flowers singing for them.

'I am content,' said Grigg. 'But what do I do all day?'

Vin replied. 'The Greek Church says that work was the fruit of sin. Here the fruit is more wholesome.'

And, indeed, for a moment Grigg almost felt that he knew what the Garden of Eden had really been like: not the boring, moral attenuation of it; but the physical splendour, with flowers perfumed like these, with tiny, aquamarine birds, singing like honey, with indifference as to whether one was clothed or naked, with beauty to make it indifferent.

'The Greek Church,' said Lek, 'had once a prophet. "Take no thought for the morrow," he said; and spoke of lilies.'

'But not of lilies only,' said Grigg. 'Far from it, alas.'

'You must not expect a Greek prophet to be always wise. The Greeks used to decorate their houses with flowers, and sing songs. Now they buy tinsel

from shops and listen to radios. The Greek radios are the noisiest in the world. It is not surprising that Greek prophets often make mistakes.'

'You can't prophesy,' said Tal, 'when there's such a noise that no one can hear you.'

'But the radio is new,' objected Grigg.

Lek would have none of it. 'The radio has been with us since the dawn of time,' she said.

'I believe that men thought of it when they took over the world,' said Tal.

'I prefer listening to you,' said Grigg. 'Sing me the song the sirens sang.'

So they did.

*

On one occasion, two rather unpleasant things happened on the same day.

The first was that Grigg, roaming about the citadel, as he was so often told he was perfectly free to do, came upon a shut door. It was in the basement, or cellar, where he had previously hesitated to go: a sequence of low rooms, as it proved, sunk into the rock, which, quite unmodified, formed the irregular floor. The rooms were ill-lighted by small windows high in the walls. Grigg had tried the door, which was deep in the furthest rocky wall, and opened it, before he realised that it was the first door he had had to open at all; the others, as far as he could remember, having stood wide before him, at least when originally met with. He thought of Alfred de Musset's proverb: A door is either open or shut.

Inside, it was totally black; as thick, Grigg found himself thinking, as that wine. He hesitated to take even one step inside, but craned in, listening, and drawing the door close behind him. A long way below, as it seemed, was a noise: Grigg wondered if it could come from the bottom of a deep pit. At first he thought it sounded like the ebb and flow of the waves, and supposed there might be a rift in the rock; but then, in a curious way, it sounded more

like a gigantic process of ingestion, as if, perhaps, a press were reducing a miscellany of organic matter to, as people say, pulp. The sound rose and fell, though something less than rhythmically, but never quite ceased; and every now and then a smell rose from the pit, if pit there was, a smell akin to the noise, in that it might have been of long-rotted tideless seaweed or, alternatively, of vaguer and terrestrial decomposition. The smell, though unpleasant, came only in strong whiffs, and Grigg wondered why it was apparently uncontinuous. Could something below be opening and shutting, appearing and withdrawing? Noise, smell, and darkness were plainly related to the formations of the rock, but Grigg found the place disturbing, as a child often finds a room he has entered without clear authority.

None the less, it was fascinating, and Grigg could not quite go, either: still like the transfixed child. He felt less than ever inclined to proceed further, but remained half-in, half-out, trying to peer through the blackness, but dreading at the same time. And, in the end, something terrible happened, or something which Grigg found terrible: it was as if the pit spoke. There was a sudden growling roar; a noise entirely different from what had gone before; and Grigg was sure that there were clear words. He could not understand them, and they did not sound like Greek, but words he knew they were, and addressed to him. The personal note was unmistakable, it was as if the pit and the darkness, the noise and the smell, had been watching him, and were now warning him off, and leaving no possibility of mistake.

Grigg reeled back and slammed the door. Stumbling over the rocky floor, he hastened into the sunlight. Even before he had reached the courtyard, he had begun to realise that he had merely been the victim of an aural hallucination – an hallucination of a quite common type, indeed; almost the sort of thing staged for tourists visiting Mediterranean grottoes. When he found himself alone in the courtyard, he realised that he had nearly made a serious fool of himself. Even though the first terror had by then ebbed, there was no knowing what idiotic thing he might have said if there had been anyone to listen.

He climbed over the courtyard wall and stretched out on the rock finally to recover his wits.

That same evening, he heard the women shouting and laughing, out beyond the gateway to the harbour. He went to look. The sky was almost emerald green and they moved in magnificent silhouette against it. The three of them stood above the water's edge and below the harbour causeway, on the side of the island away from the basin. Grigg found the beauty of their movement incomparable. He stood watching them for some time, as if they presented a merely formal spectacle, of maenads on a vase, or ballet dancers, before he clearly realised that they were not merely throwing stones, but very much aiming at a target. He walked down the causeway, and stood behind them, looking over their heads.

Floating in the emerald sea beneath the emerald sky was a body; though it was unlikely to be afloat much longer, as the women knew how to throw, and every stone hit true and hard. Grigg could see the body quite well: it had belonged to a fat, elderly, clean-shaven man with a big, bald head, and was dressed in a dark, conventional suit, of which the open jacket spread out in the water, like a pair of fins. All round the body the sea was red, like the death of a whale. Grigg shuddered as he thought of the whale.

The skilled throwing went on for another minute or two, a marvel of ancient beauty, and then, suddenly, the body collapsed and sank. Grigg could hear the water pouring in, as into a pierced gourd. The women, apparently still unaware of him, stood in lovely silent attitudes and watched it go. When they saw nothing left but the fading patch of carmine, they turned, saw Grigg, and advanced laughing and gesticulating, their hair dishevelled and their faces flushed with excitement.

'Who was he?' asked Grigg.

'A tourist. They fall out of boats.'

'They fall off pier-heads.'

'They fall from Heaven.'

Grigg felt as once he had done when he found himself encompassed by English and American enthusiasts for the bull-fight. But now, at least, the central object had been dead to start with. Or so he could but suppose.

*

But this was not the only time when Grigg saw blood in the sea.

*

After he had been, as he thought, about three weeks on the island, or perhaps as much as a month, there was a great storm. There had been little forewarning, or little that Grigg had been able to sense; and the women had said nothing. The first lightning leapt at him in his room, taking him completely by surprise as he lay there musing in the warm darkness, some time after midnight. It was curious pink lightning, condensing, as it seemed, the entire firmament into a single second; and the thunder which followed might well have torn apart the total citadel... except that, to Grigg's astonishment, there was no thunder, nothing of the kind beyond a faint rumble, more as if the Olympians had been overheard conversing than as if there had been an electrical discharge. On the instant, there followed another flash and brief rumble of distant talk; and then another. Grigg now listened for rain, of which there had been none that he was aware of since his arrival; but though, according to the laws of nature, it must have been raining somewhere, all there seemed to be here was a rising wind. Lightning was flickering from cherry-blossom almost to scarlet; but Grigg hardly noticed it as the wind rose and rose, like a cataract of water charging through the widening burst in a dam and sweeping down a valley, presenting to Grigg a similar picture of instant danger and catastrophe. He caught up the garment the women had woven for him and hastened round the big dark room shutting windows, like a suburban housewife. Those in one of the walls were too high for him to reach, but at least there was as yet no question of water pouring in.

'There have always been storms like this.'

It was Lek's voice. Grigg could just perceive her shape standing by the door. 'There is nothing to be afraid of. The citadel is built to remain standing.' A flash of rosy lightning filled the room, so that, for a second, Grigg saw her with unnatural clarity, as if she had been an angel. 'Come and look.'

Lek clasped his hand and led him out. They ascended the pitch-black, stone stair. 'Do not falter,' said Lek. 'Trust me.' Grigg, feeling no doubt at all, went up the hard, dark steps without even stubbing a toe. They came out on the roof.

The sky was washed all over with the curious pink of the lightning. Grigg had never seen anything like it before, and had never known so strange a wind, roaring, but warm, and even scented. Faintly massed against the rosy dimness at the other end of the flat roof was the recumbent shape of the male god. Lek stood looking at the god, herself a lovely, living statue. Grigg was filled with awe and revelation.

'Tal is earth,' he said, somehow speaking above the roar of the wind.

As far as he could see, Lek moved not an eyelid.

'Vin is fire.'

He thought she faintly smiled.

'And you are air.'

A smile it was. There could be no doubt about it. And her eyes were far-distant vastnesses. The wind hummed and sang. Grigg kissed Lek, lightly as a leaf.

'Come nearer to the god,' said Lek, drawing him onward through the hurricane. 'It is for him. Everything is for him.'

And for the prostrate Grigg, as the warm wind blew and blew, the heavens opened.

This time, just as much as he had finally forgotten to ask questions, so, at the end, he made no foolish demands.

*

On another night, conceivably a week later, Grigg was awakened by what must have been an unusual sound. He sat up and listened. There was

nothing at all loud to be heard, but there was an unmistakable clinking and clanking in the island night, systematic, purposive, human. It occurred to Grigg immediately that there was an intruder – one intruder at least.

He put on his garment and descended, without disturbing the women, presumably on the floor below.

He stood in the courtyard avoiding the gaze of the stars in order the better to judge where the noise was coming from.

He padded across the courtyard stones to the gateway leading to the tower he had climbed when first he came.

On the top of the tower, visible above the roofs of the intervening ruins, he could just make out a figure; blacker than the night, and palpably at some manner of work.

Grigg hesitated for a considerable number of moments. Should he try to investigate on his own, or should he first rouse the women? He probably decided on the former because he still felt short of experience and knowledge that were not mediated by what the women themselves called sorcery. He half-welcomed a moment to investigate on his own.

He started to scramble, as quietly as was possible, through the rough foundations and tough thickets. Possibly he could not be quiet *enough* under such adverse conditions, because when at length he reached the tower, the black figure was gone, and a small black motor-boat was chugging across the black sea. The top of the tower had been screened from his view by the old fortress walls for much of the time he had been scrambling through the miniature Turkish jungle. The boat was the first he had seen so near the island. He watched it until, lightless, void of all detail, it merged into the black night.

He had little doubt that it meant trouble, and he made a considerable search, even climbing the spidery tower, only when half-way up reflecting that someone might still be there, someone who had remained when the boat had left. His heart missed a beat, compelling him to pause in the tight, dusty darkness, but he continued upwards. There was no one, nothing but the stars

drawn nearer, and there was no sign of intrusion, change, or recent damage; either about the tower or about the entire extremity of the island: nothing, at least, that Grigg could find or see as he plunged about, slashing and abrading himself, in the darkness beneath the uninvolved stars. He could not even make out how the interloper could possibly have managed to moor a boat and mount the sharp rock.

Grigg sought and thought so conscientiously that the first light of dawn was upon him as he clambered back to the citadel. Ineffable, he thought, was the only word for such beauty: faint grey, faint blue, faint pink, faint green; and the entire atmosphere translucent right through to the centre of the empyrean, and on to the next centre, as if, while it lasted, distance was abrogated, and the solitary individual could casually touch the impersonal core of the universe.

Back in the courtyard, he stood with his hands on the familiar wall, gazing across the tranquilly colourless, early-morning sea.

Re-ascending the citadel staircase, he tiptoed into the big hall where the women slept. The three of them lay there, touching; in dark red robes (Grigg could think of no other noun); their faces pale and their lips full, with sleep; their relaxed bodies as undefined as the good, the true, and the beautiful. Grigg stood away from the wall, motionlessly gazing, filled with the apprehension of tragedy. He stood for a long time, then dragged at his numb limbs, and went on up. There was a scorpion-like creature on his coloured cushions, which, as it refused to be driven out, he had to kill before settling down to his resumed slumbers.

*

And the next morning, there, once more, was the redness in the sea; and this time, the sea was blood-red, not in a large, repulsive, but all too explicable patch, but red as far as Grigg, gazing appalled from his high window, could see; as if all the way across to the larger, mainland island. It was fearful, nightmarish, infernal. Macbeth's dream had materialised: the green *was* one red.

Moreover, there was a second sound that was new to the island.

Grigg went down, his feet heavy.

On the floor below, the women were lamenting. In their greeny-brown dresses, they clung together, shadowy and large-eyed, wailing and babbling in some tongue of which Grigg knew nothing, doubtless their own. Even in their mortification and misery, they were as beautiful as in their previous joy.

'What has happened?'

The women stopped wailing when they saw him, and Lek spoke.

'The rock is dead.'

Not at all understanding, Grigg could not but blurt out, 'There was a man here last night. One man at least. I saw him.'

'You *saw* him,' said Vin. 'And you did not kill him?'

'Or let *us* kill him,' said Tal.

There was a difficult pause. Grigg gazed into their tear-stained faces.

'I saw him on top of the tower. I could not get to him in time across the ruins in the darkness. When I reached the tower, he was gone. I saw and heard his boat quite a long way off.'

'Why did you not tell us?' asked Lek. 'Why did you not trust us?'

To such a question conventional answers abound, but Grigg could not bring one of them to his lips. Guilt in him was reinforced by fear. He felt that he might be made to suffer, and he felt that he deserved the suffering.

'What does it mean,' he asked, 'when you say the rock is dead?'

A tremor passed through them and Vin began once more to weep.

'The rock was a living rock,' said Lek softly. 'The rock gave us wine and water. The rock was the other god, the female god, so, while the rock was

alive, you could not be told. Now they have killed the rock with a machine, so that it does not matter what is said.' As Lek spoke, Tal burst into tears and moans.

'Is there nothing I can do?'

'There is nothing that anyone in the world can do.

'This was the last living rock, and now the last living rock is dead. There is nothing but to mourn, to forgive, and to go.'

'I do not expect to be forgiven,' said Grigg. 'I deserve to die.' The words came out quite naturally; which was something he would never before have thought possible.

Lek stepped forward, took his hands, and kissed them. Then Vin and Tal did the same, leaving their tears on his mouth.

'Let me at least mourn with you.'

Lek smiled sadly, and indeed he found that the power to mourn, the power to mourn anything, was not in him.

They walked in line down the causeway, among the flowers, the birds, and the lizards; with Grigg bringing up the rear. The green and grey of the sea had absorbed nearly all the red, though there was still a faint, shimmering glow beneath the surface, melting away as Grigg watched. They took nothing.

The women spread the big, blue sail, and expertly steered the ship out of the basin into the hot morning. Grigg stood at the stern, looking back along the spreading plume of her wake.

Then Lek was standing beside him.

'How long can you swim?'

Grigg looked into her eyes.

'Possibly for half an hour,' he said. 'At least, in smooth, warm water.'

So when they neared a spit of land, he went overside in the summer clothes he had worn when he had originally cast off in his borrowed motor-boat. It was his initiation into the last of the four elements. He went without touching any of the women, and in the event, he was immersed for not much more than ten minutes before fetching up, dripping and bearded, on a pebbly strand. Even so, it was enough for the ship to have sailed almost to the horizon, so skilfully was she navigated.

The Inner Room (1966)

It was never less than half an hour after the engine stopped running that my father deigned to signal for succour. If in the process of breaking down, we had climbed, or descended, a bank, then first we must all exhaust ourselves pushing. If we had collided, there was, of course, a row. If, as had happened that day, it was simply that, while we coasted along, the machinery had ceased to churn and rattle, then my father tried his hand as a mechanic. That was the worst contingency of all; at least it was the worst one connected with motoring.

I had learned by experience that neither rain nor snow made much difference, and certainly not fog; but that afternoon it was hotter than any day I could remember. I realised later that it was the famous Long Summer of 1921, when the water at the bottom of cottage wells turned salt, and when eels were found baked and edible in their mud. But to know this at the time, I should have had to read the papers, and though, through my mother's devotion, I had the trick of reading before my third birthday, I mostly left the practice to my younger brother, Constantin. He was reading now from a pudgy volume, as thick as it was broad, and resembling his own head in size and proportion. As always, he had resumed his studies immediately the bumping of our almost springless car permitted, and even before motion had ceased. My mother sat in the front seat inevitably correcting pupils' exercises. By teaching her native German in five schools at once, three of them distant, one of them fashionable, she surprisingly managed to maintain the four of us, and even our car. The front offside door of the car leaned dangerously open into the seething highway.

'I say,' cried my father.

The young man in the big yellow racer shook his head as he tore by. My father had addressed the least appropriate car on the road.

'I say.'

I cannot recall what the next car looked like, but it did not stop.

My father was facing the direction from which we had come, and sawing the air with his left arm, like a very inexperienced policeman. Perhaps no one stopped because all thought him eccentric. Then a car going in the opposite direction came to a standstill behind my father's back. My father perceived nothing. The motorist sounded his horn. In those days, horns squealed, and I covered my ears with my hands. Between my hands and my head my long fair hair was like brittle flax in the sun.

My father darted through the traffic. I think it was the Portsmouth Road. The man in the other car got out and came to us. I noticed his companion, much younger and in a cherry-coloured cloche, begin to deal with her nails.

'Broken down?' asked the man. To me it seemed obvious, as the road was strewn with bits of the engine and oozy blobs of oil. Moreover, surely my father had explained?

'I can't quite locate the seat of the trouble,' said my father.

The man took off one of his driving gauntlets, big and dirty.

'Catch hold for a moment.' My father caught hold.

The man put his hand into the engine and made a casual movement. Something snapped loudly.

'Done right in. If you ask me, I'm not sure she'll ever go again.'

'Then I don't think I'll ask you,' said my father affably. 'Hot, isn't it?' My father began to mop his tall corrugated brow, and front-to-back ridges of grey hair.

'Want a tow?'

'Just to the nearest garage.' My father always spoke the word in perfect French.

'Where to?'

'To the nearest car repair workshop. If it would not be troubling you too much.'

'Can't help myself now, can I?'

*

From under the backseat in the other car, the owner got out a thick, frayed rope, black and greasy as the hangman's. The owner's friend simply said, 'Pleased to meet you,' and began to replace her scalpels and enamels in their cabinet. We jolted towards the town we had traversed an hour or two before; and were then untied outside a garage on the outskirts.

'Surely it is closed for the holiday?' said my mother. Hers is a voice I can always recall upon an instant: guttural, of course, but beautiful, truly golden.

"Spect he'll be back,' said our benefactor, drawing in his rope like a fisherman. 'Give him a bang.' He kicked three times very loudly upon the dropped iron shutter. Then without another word he drove away.

It was my birthday, I had been promised the sea, and I began to weep. Constantin, with a fretful little wriggle, closed further into himself and his book; but my mother leaned over the front seat of the car and opened her arms to me. I went to her and sobbed on the shoulder of her bright red dress.

'Kleine Lene, wir stecken schön in der Tinte.'

My father, who could pronounce six languages perfectly but speak only one of them, never liked my mother to use her native tongue within the family. He rapped more sharply on the shutter. My mother knew his ways, but, where our welfare was at stake, ignored them.

'Edgar,' said my mother, 'let us give the children presents. Especially my little Lene.' My tears, though childish, and less viscous than those shed in later life, had turned the scarlet shoulder of her dress to purple. She squinted smilingly sideways at the damage.

My father was delighted to defer the decision about what next to do with the car. But, as pillage was possible, my mother took with her the exercises, and Constantin his fat little book.

We straggled along the main road, torrid, raucous, adequate only for a gentler period of history. The grit and dust stung my face and arms and knees, like granulated glass. My mother and I went first, she holding my hand. My father struggled to walk at her other side, but for most of the way, the path was too narrow. Constantin mused along in the rear, abstracted as usual.

'It is true what the papers say,' exclaimed my rather. 'British roads were never built for motor traffic. Beyond the odd car, of course.'

My mother nodded and slightly smiled. Even in the lineless hopsacks of the twenties, she could not ever but look magnificent, with her rolling, turbulent, honey hair, and Hellenic proportions. Ultimately we reached the High Street. The very first shop had one of its windows stuffed with toys; the other being stacked with groceries and draperies and coal-hods, all dingy. The namePOPULAR BAZAAR, in wooden relief as if glued on in building blocks, stretched across the whole front, not quite centre.

It was not merely an out-of-fashion shop, but a shop that at the best sold too much of what no one wanted. My father comprehended the contents of the Toy Department window with a single, anxious glance, and said, 'Choose whatever you like. Both of you. But look very carefully first. Don't hurry.' Then he turned away and began to hum a fragment from 'The Lady of the Rose'.

But Constantin spoke at once. 'I choose those telegraph wires.' They ranged beside a line of tin railway that stretched right across the window, long undusted and tending to buckle. There were seven or eight posts, with six wires on each side of the post. Though I could not think why Constantin wanted them, and though in the event he did not get them, the appearance of them, and of the rusty track beneath them, is all that remains clear in my memory of that window.

'I doubt whether they're for sale,' said my father. 'Look again. There's a good boy. No hurry.'

'They're all I want,' said Constantin, and turned his back on the uninspiring display.

'Well, we'll see,' said my father. 'I'll make a special point of it with the man....' He turned to me. 'And what about you? Very few dolls, I'm afraid.'

'I don't like dolls any more.' As a matter of fact, I had never owned a proper one, although I suffered from this fact when competing with other girls, which meant very seldom, for our friends were few and occasional. The dolls in the window were flyblown and detestable.

'I think we could find a better shop from which to give Lene a birthday present,' said my mother, in her correct, dignified English.

'We must not be unjust,' said my father, 'when we have not even looked inside.'

The inferiority of the goods implied cheapness, which unfortunately always mattered; although, as it happened, none of the articles seemed actually to be priced.

'I do not like this shop,' said my mother. 'It is a shop that has died.'

Her regal manner when she said such things was, I think, too Germanic for my father's Englishness. That, and the prospect of unexpected economy, perhaps led him to be firm.

'We have Constantin's present to consider as well as Lene's. Let us go in.'

By contrast with the blazing highway, the main impression of the interior was darkness. After a few moments, I also became aware of a smell. Everything in the shop smelt of that smell, and, one felt, always would do so, the mixed odour of any general store, but at once enhanced and passé. I can smell it now.

'We do not necessarily want to buy anything,' said my father, 'but, if we may, should like to look round?'

Since the days of Mr. Selfridge the proposition is supposed to be taken for granted, but at that time the message had yet to spread. The bazaar keeper seemed hardly to welcome it. He was younger than I had expected (an unusual thing for a child, but I had probably been awaiting a white-bearded gnome); though pale, nearly bald, and perceptibly grimy. He wore an untidy grey suit and bedroom slippers.

'Look about you, children,' said my father. 'Take your time. We can't buy presents every day.'

I noticed that my mother still stood in the doorway.

'I want those wires,' said Constantin.

'Make quite sure by looking at the other things first.'

Constantin turned aside bored, his book held behind his back. He began to scrape his feet. It was up to me to uphold my father's position. Rather timidly, I began to peer about, not going far from him. The bazaar keeper silently watched me with eyes colourless in the twilight.

'Those toy telegraph poles in your window,' said my father after a pause, fraught for me with anxiety and responsibility. 'How much would you take for them?'

'They are not for sale,' said the bazaar keeper, and said no more.

'Then why do you display them in the window?'

'They are a kind of decoration, I suppose.' Did he not know? I wondered.

'Even if they're not normally for sale, perhaps you'll sell them to me,' said my vagabond father, smiling like Rothschild. 'My son, you see, has taken a special fancy to them.'

'Sorry,' said the man in the shop.

'Are you the principal here?'

'I am.'

'Then surely as a reasonable man,' said my father, switching from superiority to ingratiation.

'They are to dress the window,' said the bazaar man. 'They are not for sale.'

This dialogue entered through the back of my head as, diligently and unobtrudingly, I conned the musty stock. At the back of the shop was a window, curtained all over in grey lace: to judge by the weak light it offered, it gave on to the living quarters. Through this much filtered illumination glimmered the façade of an enormous dolls' house. I wanted it at once. Dolls had never been central to my happiness, but this abode of their was the most grown-up thing in the shop.

It had battlements, and long straight walls, and a variety of pointed windows. A gothic revival house, no doubt; or even mansion. It was painted the colour of stone; a grey stone darker than the grey light, which flickered round it. There was a two-leaved front door, with a small classical portico. It was impossible to see the whole house at once, as it stood grimed and neglected on the corner of the wide trestle-shelf. Very slowly I walked along two of the sides; the other two being dark against the walls of the shop. From the first-floor window in the side not immediately visible as one approached, leaned a doll, droopy and unkempt. It was unlike any real house I had seen, and, as for dolls' houses, they were always after the style of the villa near Gerrard's Cross belonging to my father's successful brother. My uncle's house itself looked much more like a toy than this austere structure before me.

'Wake up,' said my mother's voice. She was standing just behind me.

'What about some light on the subject?' enquired my father.

A switch clicked.

The house really was magnificent. Obviously, beyond all financial reach.

'Looks like a model for Pentonville Gaol,' observed my father.

'It is beautiful,' I said. 'It's what I want.'

'It's the most depressing-looking plaything I ever saw.'

'I want to pretend I live in it,' I said, 'and give masked balls.' My social history was eager but indiscriminate.

'How much is it?' asked my mother. The bazaar keeper stood resentfully in the background, sliding each hand between the thumb and fingers of the other.

'It's only second-hand,' he said. 'Tenth-hand, more like. A lady brought it in and said she needed to get rid of it. I don't want to sell you something you don't want.'

'But suppose we *do* want it?' said my father truculently. 'Is nothing in this shop for sale?'

'You can take it away for a quid,' said the bazaar keeper. 'And glad to have the space.'

'There's someone looking out,' said Constantin. He seemed to be assessing the house, like a surveyor or valuer.

'It's full of dolls,' said the bazaar keeper. 'They're thrown in. Sure you can transport it?'

'Not at the moment,' said my father, 'but I'll send someone down.' This, I knew, would be Moon the seedman, who owned a large canvas-topped lorry, and with whom my father used to fraternise on the putting green.

'Are you quite sure?' my mother asked me.

'Will it take up too much room?'

My mother shook her head. Indeed, our home, though out of date and out at elbows, was considerably too large for us.

'Then, please.'

Poor Constantin got nothing.

*

Mercifully, all our rooms had wide doors, so that Moon's driver, assisted by the youth out of the shop, lent specially for the purpose, could ease my birthday present to its new resting place without tilting it or inflicting a wound upon my mother's new and self-applied paint. I noticed that the doll at the first-floor side window had prudently withdrawn.

For my house, my parents had allotted me the principal spare room, because in the centre of it stood a very large dinner table, once to be found in the servants' hall of my father's childhood home in Lincolnshire, but now the sole furniture our principal spare room contained. (The two lesser spare rooms were filled with cardboard boxes, which every now and then toppled in heart-arresting avalanches on still summer nights.) On the big table the driver and the shop boy set my house. It reached almost to the sides, so that those passing along the narrow walks would be in peril of tumbling into a gulf; but, the table being much longer than it was wide, the house was provided at front and back with splendid parterres of deal, embrocated with caustic until they glinted like fluorspar.

When I had settled upon the exact site for the house, so that the garden front would receive the sun from the two windows, and a longer parterre stretched at the front than at the back, where the columned entry faced the door of the room, I withdrew to a distant corner while the two males eased the edifice into exact alignment.

'Snug as a bug in a rug,' said Moon's driver when the perilous walks at the sides of the house had been made straight and equal.

'Snugger,' said Moon's boy.

*

I waited for their boots, mailed with crescent silvers of steel, to reach the bottom of our creaking, coconut-matted stair, then I tiptoed to the landing, looked, and listened. The sun had gone in just before the lorry arrived, and down the passage the motes had ceased to dance. It was three o'clock, my mother was still at one of her schools, my father was at the rifle range. I heard the men shut the back door. The principal spare room had never before been occupied, so that the key was outside. In a second, I transferred it to the inside, and shut and locked myself in.

As before in the shop, I walked slowly round my house, but this time round all four sides of it. Then, with the knuckles of my thin white forefinger, I tapped gently at the front door. It seemed not to have been secured, because it opened, both leaves of it, as I touched it. I pried in, first with one eye, then with the other. The lights from various of the pointed windows blotched the walls and floor of the miniature Entrance Hall. None of the dolls was visible.

It was not one of those dolls' houses of commerce from which sides can be lifted in their entirety. To learn about my house, it would be necessary, albeit impolite, to stare through the windows, one at a time. I decided first to take the ground floor. I started in a clockwise direction from the front portico. The front door was still open, but I could not see how to shut it from the outside.

There was a room to the right of the hall, leading into two other rooms along the right side of the house, of which, again, one led into the other. All the rooms were decorated and furnished in a Mrs. Fitzherbert-ish style; with handsomely striped wallpapers, botanical carpets, and chairs with legs like sticks of brittle golden sweetmeat. There were a number of pictures. I knew just what they were: family portraits. I named the room next the Hall, the Occasional Room, and the room beyond it, the Morning Room. The third room was very small: striking out confidently, I named it the Canton Cabinet, although it contained neither porcelain nor fans. I knew what the rooms in a great house should be called, because my mother used to show me the pictures in large, once-fashionable volumes on the subject which my father had bought for their bulk at junk shops.

Then came the Long Drawing Room, which stretched across the entire garden front of the house, and contained the principal concourse of dolls. It had four pointed French windows, all made to open, though now sealed with dust and rust; above which were bulbous triangles of coloured glass, in tiny snowflake panes. The apartment itself played at being a cloister in a Horace Walpole convent; lierne vaulting ramified across the arched ceiling, and the spidery gothic pilasters were tricked out in mediaeval patchwork, as in a Puseyite church. On the stout golden wallpaper were decent Swiss pastels of indeterminate subjects. There was a grand piano, very black, scrolly, and, no doubt, resounding; four shapely chandeliers; a baronial fireplace with a mythical blazon above the mantel; and eight dolls, all of them female, dotted about on chairs and ottomans with their backs to me. I hardly dared to breathe as I regarded their woolly heads, and noted the colours of their hair: two black, two nondescript, one grey, one a discoloured silver beneath the dust, one blonde, and one a dyed-looking red. They wore woollen Victorian clothes, of a period later, I should say, than that when the house was built, and certainly too warm for the present season; in varied colours, all of them dull. Happy people, I felt even then, would not wear these variants of rust, indigo, and greenwood.

I crept onwards; to the Dining Room. It occupied half its side of the house, and was dark and oppressive. Perhaps it might look more inviting when the chandelier blazed, and the table candles, each with a tiny purple shade, were lighted. There was no cloth on the table, and no food or drink. Over the fireplace was a big portrait of a furious old man: his white hair was a spiky aureole round his distorted face, beetroot-red with rage; the mouth was open, and even the heavy lips were drawn back to show the savage, strong teeth; he was brandishing a very thick walking stick, which seemed to leap from the picture and stun the beholder. He was dressed neutrally, and the painter had not provided him with a background: there was only the aggressive figure menacing the room. I was frightened.

Two rooms on the ground floor remained before I once more reached the front door. In the first of them a lady was writing with her back to the light and therefore to me. She frightened me also; because her grey hair was disordered and of uneven length, and descended in matted plaits, like snakes escaping from a basket, to the shoulders of her coarse grey dress. Of

course, being a doll, she did not move, but the back of her head looked mad. Her presence prevented me from regarding at all closely the furnishings of the Writing Room.

Back at the north front, as I resolved to call it, perhaps superseding the compass rather than leading it, there was a cold-looking room, with a carpetless stone floor and white walls, upon which were the mounted heads and horns of many animals. They were all the room contained, but they covered the walls from floor to ceiling. I felt sure that the ferocious old man in the Dining Room had killed all these creatures, and I hated him for it. But I knew what the room would be called: it would be the Trophy Room.

Then I realised that there was no kitchen. It could hardly be upstairs. I had never heard of such a thing. But I looked.

It wasn't there. All the rooms on the first floor were bedrooms. There were six of them, and they so resembled one another, all with dark ochreous wallpaper and narrow brass bedsteads corroded with neglect, that I found it impracticable to distinguish them other than by numbers, at least for the present. Ultimately I might know the house better. Bedrooms 2, 3 and 6 contained two beds each. I recalled that at least nine people lived in the house. In one room the dark walls, the dark floor, the bed linen, and even the glass in the window were splashed, smeared, and further darkened with ink: it seemed apparent who slept there.

I sat on an orange box and looked. My house needed painting and dusting and scrubbing and polishing and renewing; but on the whole I was relieved that things were not worse. I had felt that the house had stood in the dark corner of the shop for no one knew how long, but this, I now saw, could hardly have been true. I wondered about the lady who had needed to get rid of it. Despite that need, she must have kept things up pretty thoroughly. How did she do it? How did she get in? I resolved to ask my mother's advice. I determined to be a good landlord, although, like most who so resolve, my resources were nil. We simply lacked the money to regild my Long Drawing Room in proper gold leaf. But I would bring life to the nine dolls now drooping with boredom and neglect...

Then I recalled something. What had become of the doll who had been sagging from the window? I thought she must have been jolted out, and felt myself a murderess. But none of the windows was open. The sash might easily have descended with the shaking; but more probably the poor doll lay inside on the floor of her room. I again went round from room to room, this time on tiptoe, but it was impossible to see the areas of floor just below the dark windows.... It was not merely sunless outside, but heavily overcast. I unlocked the door of our principal spare room and descended pensively to await my mother's return and tea.

Wormwood Grange, my father called my house, with penological associations still on his mind. (After he was run over, I realised for the first time that there might be a reason for this, and for his inability to find work worthy of him.) My mother had made the most careful inspection on my behalf, but had been unable to suggest any way of making an entry, or at least of passing beyond the Hall, to which the front doors still lay open. There seemed no question of whole walls lifting off, of the roof being removable, or even of a window being opened, including, mysteriously, on the first floor.

'I don't think it's meant for children, Liebchen,' said my Mother, smiling her lovely smile. 'We shall have to consult the Victoria and Albert Museum.'

'Of course it's not meant for children,' I replied. 'That's why I wanted it. I'm going to receive, like La Belle Otero.'

Next morning, after my mother had gone to work, my father came up, and wrenched and prodded with his unskilful hands.

'I'll get a chisel,' he said. 'We'll prise it open at each corner, and when we've got the fronts off, I'll go over to Woolworths and buy some hinges and screws. I expect they'll have some.'

At that I struck my father in the chest with my fist. He seized my wrists, and I screamed that he was not to lay a finger on my beautiful house, that he would be sure to spoil it, that force never got anyone anywhere. I knew my father: when he took an idea for using tools into his head, the only hope for

one's property lay in a scene, and in the implication of tears without end in the future, if the idea were not dropped.

While I was screaming and raving, Constantin appeared from the room below, where he worked at his books.

'Give us a chance, Sis,' he said. 'How can I keep it all in my head about the Thirty Years War when you haven't learned to control your tantrums?'

Although two years younger than I, Constantin should have known that I was past the age for screaming except of set purpose.

'You wait until he tries to rebind all your books, you silly sneak,' I yelled at him.

My father released my wrists.

'Wormwood Grange can keep,' he said. 'I'll think of something else to go over to Woolworths for.' He sauntered off.

Constantin nodded gravely. 'I understand,' he said. 'I understand what you mean. I'll go back to my work. Here, try this.' He gave me a small, chipped nail file.

I spent most of the morning fiddling very cautiously with the imperfect jemmy, and trying to make up my mind about the doll at the window.

*

I failed to get into my house, and I refused to let my parents give me any effective aid. Perhaps by now I did not really want to get in, although the dirt and disrepair, and the apathy of the dolls, who so badly needed plumping up and dispersing, continued to case me distress. Certainly I spent as long trying to shut the front door as trying to open a window or find a concealed spring (that idea was Constantin's). In the end I wedged the two halves of the front door with two halves of match; but I felt that the arrangement was makeshift and undignified. I refused everyone access to the principal spare room until something more appropriate could be

evolved. My plans for routs and orgies had to be deferred: one could hardly riot among dust and cobwebs.

Then I began to have dreams about my house, and about its occupants.

One of the oddest dreams was the first. It was three or four days after I entered into possession. During that time it had remained cloudy and oppressive, so that my father took to leaving off his knitted waistcoat; then suddenly it thundered. It was a long, slow, distant, intermittent thunder; and it continued all the evening, until, when it was quite dark, my bedtime and Constantin's could no longer be deferred.

'Your ears will get accustomed to the noise,' said my father. 'Just try to take no notice of it.'

Constantin looked dubious; but I was tired of the slow, rumbling hours, and ready for the different dimension of dreams.

I slept almost immediately, although the thunder was rolling round my big, rather empty bedroom, round the four walls, across the floor, and under the ceiling, weighting the black air as with a smoky vapour. Occasionally, the lightning glinted, pink and green. It was still the long-drawn-out preliminary to a storm; the tedious, imperfect dispersal of the accumulated energy of the summer. The rollings and rumblings entered my dreams, which flickered, changed, were gone as soon as come, failed, like the lightning, to concentrate or strike home, were as difficult to profit by as the events of an average day.

After exhausting hours of phantasmagoria, anticipating so many later nights in my life, I found myself in a black wood, with huge, dense trees. I was following a path, but reeled from tree to tree, bruising and cutting myself on their hardness and roughness. There seemed no end to the wood or to the night; but suddenly, in the thick of both, I came upon my house. It stood solid, immense, hemmed in, with a single light, little more, it seemed, than a night-light, burning in every upstairs window (as often in dreams, I could see all four sides of the house at once), and illuminating two wooden wedges, jagged and swollen, which held tight the front doors. The vast trees dipped and swayed their elephantine boughs over the roof; the wind peeked

and creaked through the black battlements. Then there was a blaze of whitest lightning, proclaiming the storm itself. In the second it endured, I saw my two wedges fly through the air and the double front door burst open.

For the hundredth time, the scene changed, and now I was back in my room, though still asleep or half-asleep, still dragged from vision to vision. Now the thunder was coming in immense, calculated bombardments; the lightning ceaseless and searing the face of the earth. From being a weariness the storm had become an ecstasy. It seemed as if the whole world would be in dissolution before the thunder had spent its impersonal, unregarding strength. But, as I say, I must still have been at least half-asleep, because between the fortissimi and the lustre I still from time to time saw scenes, meaningless or nightmarish, which could not be found in the wakeful world; still, between and through the volleys, heard impossible sounds.

I do not know whether I was asleep or awake when the storm rippled into tranquillity. I certainly did not feel that the air had been cleared; but this may have been because, surprisingly, I heard a quick soft step passing along the passage outside my room, a passage uncarpeted through our poverty. I well knew all the footsteps in the house, and this was none of them.

Always one to meet trouble half-way, I dashed in my nightgown to open the door. I looked out. The dawn was seeping, without effort or momentum, through every cranny, and showed shadowy the back of a retreating figure, the size of my mother but with woolly red hair and long rust-coloured dress. The padding feet seemed actually to start soft echoes amid all that naked woodwork. I had no need to consider who she was or whither she was bound. I burst into the purposeless tears I so despised.

*

In the morning, and before deciding upon what to impart, I took Constantin with me to look at the house. I more than half-expected big changes; but none was to be seen. The sections of match-stick were still in position, and the dolls as inactive and diminutive as ever, sitting with their backs to me

on chairs and sofas in the Long Drawing Room; their hair dusty, possibly even mothy. Constantin looked at me curiously, but I imparted nothing.

Other dreams followed; though at considerable intervals. Many children have recurring nightmares of oppressive realism and terrifying content; and I realised from past experience that I must outgrow the habit or lose my house – my house at least. It is true that my house now frightened me, but I felt that I must not be foolish and should strive to take a grown-up view of painted woodwork and nine understuffed dolls. Still it was bad when I began to hear them in the darkness; some tapping, some stumping, some creeping, and therefore not one, but many, or all; and worse when I began not to sleep for fear of the mad doll (as I was sure she was) doing something mad, although I refused to think what. I never dared again to look; but when something happened, which, as I say, was only at intervals (and to me, being young, they seemed long intervals), I lay taut and straining among the forgotten sheets. Moreover, the steps themselves were never quite constant, certainly too inconstant to report to others; and I am not sure that I should have heard anything significant if I had not once seen. But now I locked the door of our principal spare room on the outside, and altogether ceased to visit my beautiful, impregnable mansion.

I noticed that my mother made no comment. But one day my father complained of my ingratitude in never playing with my handsome birthday present. I said I was occupied with my holiday task: *Moby Dick*. This was an approved answer, and even, as far as it went, a true one, though I found the book pointless in the extreme, and horribly cruel.

'I told you the Grange was the wrong thing to buy,' said my father. 'Morbid sort of object for a toy.'

'None of us can learn except by experience,' said my mother.

My father said, 'Not at all,' and bristled.

*

All this, naturally, was in the holidays. I was going at the time to one of my mother's schools, where I should stay until I could begin to train as a

dancer, upon which I was conventionally but entirely resolved. Constantin went to another, a highly cerebral co-educational place, where he would remain until, inevitably, he won a scholarship to a University, perhaps a foreign one. Despite our years, we went our different ways dangerously on small dingy bicycles. We reached home at assorted hours, mine being the longer journey.

One day I returned to find our dining-room table littered with peculiarly uninteresting printed drawings. I could make nothing of them whatever (they did not seem even to belong to the kind of geometry I was – regretfully – used to); and they curled up on themselves when one tried to examine them, and bit one's finger. My father had a week or two before taking one of his infrequent jobs; night work of some kind a long way off, to which he had now departed in our car. Obviously the drawings were connected with Constantin, but he was not there.

I went upstairs, and saw that the principal spare room door was open. Constantin was inside. There had, of course, been no question of the key to the room being removed. It was only necessary to turn it.

'Hallo, Lene,' Constantin said in his matter-of-face way. 'We've been doing axonometric projection, and I'm projecting your house.' He was making one of the drawings; on a sheet of thick white paper. 'It's for home-work. It'll knock out all the others. They've got to do their real houses.'

It must not be supposed that I did not like Constantin, although often he annoyed me with his placidity and precision. It was weeks since I had seen my house, and it looked unexpectedly interesting. A curious thing happened: nor was it the last time in my life that I experienced it. Temporarily I became a different person; confident, practical, simple. The clear evening sun of autumn may have contributed.

'I'll help,' I said. 'Tell me what to do.'

'It's a bore I can't get in to take measurements. Although we haven't *got* to. In fact, the Clot told us not. Just a general impression, he said. It's to give us the *concept* of axonometry. But, golly, it would be simpler with feet and inches.'

To judge by the amount of white paper he had covered in what could only have been a short time, Constantin seemed to me to be doing very well, but he was one never to be content with less than perfection.

'Tell me', I said, 'what to do, and I'll do it.'

'Thanks,' he replied, sharpening his pencil with a special instrument. 'But it's a one-man job this. In the nature of the case. Later I'll show you how to do it, and you can do some other building if you like.'

I remained, looking at my house and fingering it, until Constantin made it clearer that I was a distraction. I went away, changed my shoes, and put on the kettle against my mother's arrival, and our High Tea.

When Constantin came down (my mother had called for him three times, but that was not unusual), he said, 'I say, Sis, here's a rum thing.'

My mother said, 'Don't use slang, and don't call your sister Sis.'

He said, as he always did when reproved by her, 'I'm sorry, Mother.' Then he thrust the drawing paper at me. 'Look, there's a bit missing. See what I mean?' He was showing me with his stub of emerald pencil, pocked with toothmarks.

Of course, I didn't see. I didn't understand a thing about it.

'After Tea,' said my mother. She gave to such familiar words not a maternal but an imperial decisiveness.

'But Mum –' pleaded Constantin.

'Mother,' said my mother.

Constantin started dipping for sauerkraut.

Silently we ate ourselves into tranquillity; or, for me, into the appearance of it. My alternative personality, though it had survived Constantin's refusal of my assistant, was now beginning to ebb.

'What is all this that you are doing?' enquired my mother in the end. 'It resembles the Stone of Rosetta.'

'I'm taking an axonometric cast of Lene's birthday house.'

'And so?'

But Constantin was not now going to expound immediately. He put in his mouth a finger of rye bread smeared with homemade cheese. Then he said quietly, 'I got down a rough idea of the house, but the rooms don't fit. At least, they don't on the bottom floor. It's all right, I think, on the top floor. In fact that's the rummest thing of all. Sorry, Mother.' He had been speaking with his mouth full, and now filled it fuller.

'What nonsense is this?' To me it seemed that my mother was glaring at him in a way most unlike her.

'It's not nonsense, Mother. Of course, I haven't measured the place, because you can't. But I haven't done axonometry for nothing. There's a part of the bottom floor I can't get at. A secret room or something.'

'Show me.'

'Very well, Mother.' Constantin put down his remnant of bread and cheese. He rose, looking a little pale. He took the drawing round the table to my mother.

'Not that thing. I can't understand it, and I don't believe you can understand it either.' Only sometimes to my father did my mother speak like that. 'Show me in the house.'

I rose too.

'You stay here, Lene. Put some more water in the kettle and boil it.'

'But it's my house. I have a right to know.'

My mother's expression changed to one more familiar. 'Yes, Lene,' she said, 'you have a right. But please not now. I ask you.'

I smiled at her and picked up the kettle.

'Come, Constantin.'

*

I lingered by the kettle in the kitchen, not wishing to give an impression of eavesdropping or even undue eagerness, which I knew would distress my mother. I never wished to learn things that my mother wished to keep from me, and I never questioned her implication of 'All in good time'.

But they were not gone long, for well before the kettle had begun even to grunt, my mother's beautiful voice was summoning me back.

'Constantin is quite right,' she said, when I had presented myself at the dining room table, 'and it was wrong of me to doubt it. The house is built in a funny sort of way. But what does it matter?'

Constantin was not eating.

'I am glad that you are studying well, and learning such useful things,' said my mother.

She wished the subject to be dropped, and we dropped it.

Indeed, it was difficult to think what more could be said. But I waited for a moment in which I was alone with Constantin. My father's unhabitual absence made this difficult, and it was completely dark before the moment came.

And when, as was only to be expected, Constantin had nothing to add, I felt, most unreasonably, that he was joined with my mother in keeping something from me.

'But what *happened*?' I pressed him. 'What happened when you were in the room with her?'

'What do you think happened?' replied Constantin, wishing, I thought, that my mother would re-enter. 'Mother realised that I was right. Nothing more.

What does it matter anyway?'

That final query confirmed my doubts.

'Constantin,' I said. 'Is there anything I ought to do?'

'Better hack the place open,' he answered, almost irritably.

*

But a most unexpected thing happened, that, had I even considered adopting Constantin's idea, would have saved me the trouble. When next day I returned from school, my house was gone.

Constantin was sitting in his usual corner, this time absorbing Greek paradigms. Without speaking to him (nothing unusual in that when he was working), I went straight to the principal spare room. The vast deal table, less scrubbed than once, was bare. The place where my house had stood was very visible, as if indeed a palace had been swept off by a djinn. But I could see no other sign of its passing: no scratched woodwork, or marks of boots, or disjoined fragments.

Constantin seemed genuinely astonished at the news. But I doubted him.

'You knew,' I said.

'Of course I didn't know.'

Still, he understood what I was thinking.

He said again, 'I didn't know.'

Unlike me on occasion, he always spoke the truth.

I gathered myself together and blurted out, 'Have they done it themselves?' Inevitably I was frightened, but in a way I was also relieved.

'Who do you mean?'

'They.'

I was inviting ridicule, but Constantin was kind.

He said, 'I know who I think has done it, but you mustn't let on. I think Mother's done it.'

I did not again enquire uselessly into how much more he knew than I. I said, 'But *how*?'

Constantin shrugged. It was a habit he had assimilated with so much else.

'Mother left the house with us this morning and she isn't back yet.'

'She must have put Father up to it.'

'But there are no marks.'

'Father might have got help.' There was a pause. Then Constantin said, 'Are you sorry?'

'In a way,' I replied. Constantin with precocious wisdom left it at that.

When my mother returned, she simply said that my father had already lost his new job, so that we had had to sell things.

'I hope you will forgive your father and me,' she said. 'We've had to sell one of my watches also. Father will soon be back to Tea.'

She too was one I had never known to lie; but now I began to perceive how relative and instrumental truth could be.

*

I need not say: not in those terms. Such clear concepts, with all they offer of gain and loss, come later, if they come at all. In fact, I need not say that the whole of what goes before is so heavily filtered through later experience as to be of little evidential value. But I am scarcely putting forward evidence.

There is so little. All I can do is to tell something of what happened, as it now seems to me to have been.

I remember sulking at my mother's news, and her explaining to me that really I no longer liked the house and that something better would be bought for me in replacement when our funds permitted.

I did ask my father when he returned to our evening meal, whistling and falsely jaunty about the lost job, how much he had been paid for my house.

'A trifle more than I gave for it. That's only business.'

'Where is it now?'

'Never you mind.'

'Tell her,' said Constantin. 'She wants to know.'

'Eat your herring,' said my father very sharply. 'And mind your own business.'

And, thus, before long my house was forgotten, my occasional nightmares returned to earlier themes.

It was, as I say, for two or three months in 1921 that I owned the house and from time to time dreamed that creatures I supposed to be its occupants had somehow invaded my home. The next thirty years, more or less, can be disposed of quickly: It was the period when I tried conclusions with the outer world.

I really became a dancer; and, although the upper reaches alike of the art and of the profession notably eluded me, yet I managed to maintain myself for several years, no small achievement. I retired, as they say, upon marriage. My husband aroused physical passion in me for the first time, but diminished and deadened much else. He was reported missing in the late misguided war. Certainly he did not return to me. I at least still miss him, though often I despise myself for doing so.

My father died in a street accident when I was fifteen: It happened on the day I received a special commendation from the sallow Frenchwoman who taught me to dance. After his death my beloved mother always wanted to return to Germany. Before long I was spiritually self-sufficient enough, or said I was, to make that possible. Unfailingly, she wrote to me twice a week, although to find words in which to reply was often difficult for me. Sometimes I visited her, while the conditions in her country became more and more uncongenial to me. She had a fair position teaching English Language and Literature at a small university; and she seemed increasingly to be infected by the new notions and emotions raging around her. I must acknowledge that sometimes their tumult and intoxication unsteadied my own mental gait, although I was a foreigner and by no means of sanguine temperament. It is a mistake to think that all professional dancers are gay.

Despite what appeared to be increasing sympathies with the new régime, my mother disappeared. She was the first of the two people who mattered to me in such very different ways, and who so unreasonably vanished. For a time I was ill, and of course I love her still more than anybody. If she had remained with me, I am sure I should never have married. Without involving myself in psychology, which I detest, I shall simply say that the thought and recollection of my mother lay, I believe, behind the self-absorption my husband complained of so bitterly and so justly. It was not really myself in which I was absorbed but the memory of perfection. It is the plain truth that such beauty, and goodness, and depth, and capacity for love were my mother's alone.

Constantin abandoned all his versatile reading and became a priest, in fact a member of the Society of Jesus. He seems exalted (possibly too much so for his colleagues and superiors), but I can no longer speak to him or bear his presence. He frightens me. Poor Constantin!

On the other hand, I, always dubious, have become a complete unbeliever. I cannot see that Constantin is doing anything but listening to his own inner voice (which has changed its tone since we were children); and mine speaks a different language. In the long run, I doubt whether there is much to be desired but death; or whether there is endurance in anything but suffering. I no longer see myself feasting crowned heads on quails.

So much for biographical intermission. I proceed to the circumstances of my second and recent experience of landlordism.

*

In the first place, I did something thoroughly stupid. Instead of following the road marked on the map, I took a short cut. It is true that the short cut was shown on the map also, but the region was much too unfrequented for a wandering footpath to be in any way dependable, especially in this generation which has ceased to walk beyond the garage or the bus stop. It was one of the least populated districts in the whole country, and, moreover, the slow autumn dusk was already perceptible when I pushed at the first, dilapidated gate.

To begin with, the path trickled and flickered across a sequence of small damp meadows, bearing neither cattle nor crop. When it came to the third or fourth of these meadows, the way had all but vanished in the increasing sogginess, and could be continued only by looking for the stile or gate in the unkempt hedge ahead. This was not especially difficult as long as the fields remained small; but after a time I reached a depressing expanse which could hardly be termed a field at all, but was rather a large marsh. It was at this point that I should have returned and set about tramping the winding road.

But a path of some kind again continued before me, and I perceived that the escapade had already consumed twenty minutes. So I risked it, although soon I was striding laboriously from tussock to brown tussock in order not to sink above my shoes into the surrounding quagmire. It is quite extraordinary how far one can stray from a straight or determined course when thus preoccupied with elementary comfort. The hedge on the far side of the marsh was still a long way ahead, and the tussocks themselves were becoming both less frequent and less dense, so that too often I was sinking through them into the mire. I realised that the marsh sloped slightly downwards in the direction I was following, so that before I reached the hedge, I might have to cross a river. In the event, it was not so much a river as an indeterminately bounded augmentation of the softness, and moistness, and ooziness: I struggled across, jerking from false foothold to palpable pitfall, and before long despairing even of the attempt to step securely. Both

my feet were now soaked to well above the ankles, and the visibility had become less than was entirely convenient.

When I reached what I had taken for a hedge, it proved to be the boundary of an extensive thicket. Autumn had infected much of the greenery with blotched and dropping senility; so that bare brown briars arched and tousled, and purple thorns tilted at all possible angles for blood. To go further would demand an axe. Either I must retraverse the dreary bog in the perceptibly waning light, or I must skirt the edge and seek an opening in the thicket. Undecided, I looked back. I realised that I had lost the gate through which I had entered upon the marsh on the other side. There was nothing to do but creep as best I could upon the still treacherous ground along the barrier of dead dog-roses, mildewed blackberries, and rampant nettles.

But it was not long before I reached a considerable gap, from which through the tangled vegetation seemed to lead a substantial track, although by no means a straight one. The track wound on unimpeded for a considerable distance, even becoming firmer underfoot; until I realised that the thicket had become an entirely indisputable wood. The brambles clutching maliciously from the sides had become watching branches above my head. I could not recall that the map had showed a wood. If, indeed, it had done so, I should not have entered upon the footpath, because the only previous occasion in my life when I had been truly lost, in the sense of being unable to find the way back as well as being unable to go on, had been when my father had once so effectively lost us in a wood that I have never again felt the same about woods. The fear I had felt for perhaps an hour and a half on that occasion, though told to no one, and swiftly evaporating from consciousness upon our emergence, had been the veritable fear of death. Now I drew the map from where it lay against my thigh in the big pocket of my dress. It was not until I tried to read it that I realised how near I was to night. Until it came to print, the problems of the route had given me cat's eyes.

I peered, and there was no wood, no green patch on the map, but only the wavering line of dots advancing across contoured whiteness to the neck of yellow road where the short cut ended. But I did not reach any foolish conclusion. I simply guessed that I had strayed very badly; the map was

spattered with green marks in places where I had no wish to be; and the only question was in which of those many thickets I now was. I could think of no way to find out. I was nearly lost, and this time I could not blame my father.

The track I had been following still stretched ahead, as yet not too indistinct; and I continued to follow it. As the trees around me became yet bigger and thicker, fear came upon me, though not the death fear of that previous occasion, I felt, now that I knew what was going to happen next; or, rather, I felt I knew one thing that was going to happen next, a thing which was but a small and far from central part of an obscure, inapprehensible totality. As one does on such occasions, I felt more than half outside my body. If I continued much further, I might change into somebody else.

But what happened was not what I expected. Suddenly I saw a flicker of light. It seemed to emerge from the left, to weave momentarily among the trees, and to disappear to the right. It was not what I expected, but it was scarcely reassuring. I wondered if it could be a will-o'-the-wisp, a thing I had never seen, but which I understood to be connected with marshes. Next a still more prosaic possibility occurred to me, one positively hopeful: the headlights of a motor car turning a corner. It seemed the likely answer, but my uneasiness did not perceptibly diminish.

I struggled on, and the light came again: a little stronger, and twisting through the trees around me. Of course another car at the same corner of the road was not an impossibility, even though it was an unpeopled area. Then, after a period of soft but not comforting dusk, it came a third time; and, soon, a fourth. There was no sound of an engine: and it seemed to me that the transit of the light was too swift and fleeting for any car.

And then what I had been awaiting happened. I came suddenly upon a huge square house. I had known it was coming, but still it struck at my heart.

It is not every day that one finds a dream come true; and, scared though I was, I noticed details: for example, that there did not seem to be those single lights burning in every upstairs window. Doubtless dreams, like poems, demand a certain licence; and, for the matter of that, I could not see

all four sides of the house at once, as I had dreamed I had. But that perhaps was the worst of it: I was plainly not dreaming now.

A sudden greeny-pink radiance illuminated around me a morass of weed and neglect; and then seemed to hide itself among the trees on my right. The explanation of the darting lights was that a storm approached. But it was unlike other lightning I had encountered: being slower, more silent, more regular.

There seemed nothing to do but run away, though even then it seemed sensible not to run back into the wood. In the last memories of daylight, I began to wade through the dead knee-high grass of the lost lawn. It was still possible to see that the wood continued, opaque as ever, in a long line to my left; I felt my way along it, in order to keep as far as possible from the the house. I noticed, as I passed, the great portico, facing the direction from which I had emerged. Then, keeping my distance, I crept along the grey east front with its two tiers of pointed windows, all shut and one or two broken; and reached the southern parterre, visibly vaster, even in the storm-charged gloom, than the northern, but no less ravaged. Ahead, and at the side of the parterre far off to my right, ranged the encircling woodland. If no path manifested, my state would be hazardous indeed; and there seemed little reason for a path, as the approach to the house was provided by that along which I had come from the marsh.

As I struggled onwards, the whole scene was transformed: in a moment the sky became charged with roaring thunder, the earth with tumultuous rain. I tried to shelter in the adjacent wood, but instantly found myself enmeshed in bines and suckers, lacerated by invisible spears. In a minute I should be drenched. I plunged through the wet weeds towards the spreading portico.

Before the big doors I waited for several minutes, watching the lightning, and listening. The rain leapt up where it fell, as if the earth hurt it. A rising chill made the old grass shiver. It seemed unlikely that anyone could live in a house so dark; but suddenly I heard one of the doors behind me scrape open. I turned. A dark head protruded between the portals, like Punch from the side of his booth.

'Oh.' The shrill voice was of course surprised to see me.

I turned. 'May I please wait until the rain stops?'

'You can't come inside.'

I drew back; so far back that a heavy drip fell on the back of my neck from the edge of the portico. With absurd melodrama, there was a loud roll of thunder.

'I shouldn't think of it,' I said. 'I must be on my way the moment the rain lets me.' I could still see only the round head sticking out between the leaves of the door.

'In the old days we often had visitors.' This statement was made in the tone of a Cheltenham lady remarking that when a child she often spoke to gypsies. 'I only peeped out to see the thunder.'

Now, within the house, I heard another, lower voice, although I could not hear what it said. Through the long crack between the doors, a light slid out across the flagstones of the porch and down the darkening steps.

'She's waiting for the rain to stop,' said the shrill voice.

'Tell her to come in,' said the deep voice. 'Really, Emerald, you forget your manners after all this time.'

'I *have* told her,' said Emerald very petulantly, and withdrawing her head. 'She won't do it.'

'Nonsense,' said the other. 'You're just telling lies.' I got the idea that thus she always spoke to Emerald.

Then the doors opened, and I could see the two of them silhouetted in the light of a lamp which stood on a table behind them; one much the taller, but both with round heads, and both wearing long, unshapely garments. I wanted very much to escape, and failed to do so only because there seemed nowhere to go.

'Please come in at once,' said the taller figure, 'and let us take off your wet clothes.'

'Yes, yes,' squeaked Emerald, unreasonably jubilant.

'Thank you. But my clothes are not at all wet.'

'None the less, please come in. We shall take it as a discourtesy if you refuse.'

Another roar of thunder emphasised the impracticability of continuing to refuse much longer. If this was a dream, doubtless, and to judge by experience, I should awake.

And a dream it must be, because there at the front door were two big wooden wedges; and there to the right of the Hall, shadowed in the lamplight, was the Trophy Room; although now the animal heads on the walls were shoddy, fungoid ruins, their sawdust spilled and clotted on the cracked and uneven flagstones of the floor.

'You must forgive us,' said my tall hostess. 'Our landlord neglects us sadly, and we are far gone in wrack and ruin. In fact, I do not know what we should do were it not for our own resources.' At this Emerald cackled. Then she came up to me, and began fingering my clothes.

The tall one shut the door.

'Don't touch,' she shouted at Emerald, in her deep, rather grinding voice. 'Keep your fingers off.'

She picked up the large oil lamp. Her hair was a discoloured white in its beams.

'I apologise for my sister,' she said. 'We have all been so neglected that some of us have quite forgotten how to behave. Come, Emerald.'

Pushing Emerald before her, she led the way.

In the Occasional Room and the Morning Room, the gilt had flaked from the gingerbread furniture, the family portraits stared from their heavy frames, and the striped wallpaper drooped in the lamplight like an assembly of sodden, half-inflated balloons.

At the door of the Canton Cabinet, my hostess turned. 'I am taking you to meet my sisters,' she said.

'I look forward to doing so,' I replied, regardless of truth, as in childhood.

She nodded slightly, and proceeded. 'Take care,' she said. 'The floor has weak places.'

In the little Canton Cabinet, the floor had, in fact, largely given way, and been plainly converted into a hospice for rats.

And then, there they all were, the remaining six of them thinly illumined by what must surely be rushlights in the four shapely chandeliers. But now, of course, I could see their faces.

'We are all named after our birthstones,' said my hostess. 'Emerald you know. I am Opal. Here are Diamond and Garnet, Cornelian and Chrysolite. The one with the grey hair is Sardonyx, and the beautiful one is Turquoise.'

They all stood up. During the ceremony of introduction, they made odd little noises.

'Emerald and I are the eldest, and Turquoise of course is the youngest.'

Emerald stood in the corner before me, rolling her dyed-red head. The Long Drawing Room was raddled with decay. The cobwebs gleamed like steel filigree in the beam of the lamp, and the sisters seemed to have been seated in cocoons of them, like cushions of gossamer.

'There is one other sister, Topaz. But she is busy writing.'

'Writing all our diaries,' said Emerald.

'Keeping the record,' said my hostess.

A silence followed.

'Let us sit down,' said my hostess. 'Let us make our visitor welcome.'

The six of them gently creaked and subsided into their former places. Emerald and my hostess remained standing.

'Sit down, Emerald. Our visitor shall have *my* chair as it is the best.' I realised that inevitably there was no extra seat.

'Of course not,' I said. 'I can only stay for a minute. I am waiting for the rain to stop,' I explained feebly to the rest of them.

'I insist,' said my hostess.

I looked at the chair to which she was pointing. The padding was burst and rotten, the woodwork bleached and crumbling to collapse. All of them were watching me with round, vague eyes in their flat faces.

'Really,' I said, 'no, thank you, It's kind of you, but I must go.' All the same, the surrounding wood and the dark marsh beyond it loomed scarcely less appalling than the house itself and its inmates.

'We should have more to offer, more and better in every way, were it not for our landlord.' She spoke with bitterness, and it seemed to me that on all the faces the expression changed. Emerald came towards me out of her corner, and again began to finger my clothes. But this time her sister did not correct her, and when I stepped away, she stepped after me and went on as before.

'She has failed in the barest duty of sustentation.'

I could not prevent myself starting at the pronoun. At once, Emerald caught hold of my dress, and held it tightly.

'But there is one place she cannot spoil for us. One place where we can entertain in our own way.'

'Please,' I cried. 'Nothing more. I am going now.'

Emerald's pygmy grip tautened.

'It is the room where we eat.'

All the watching eyes lighted up, and became something they had not been before.

'I may almost say where we feast.'

The six of them began again to rise from their spidery bowers.

'Because *she* cannot go there.'

The sisters clapped their hands, like a rustle of leaves.

'There we can be what we really are.'

The eight of them were now grouped round me. I noticed that the one pointed out as the youngest was passing her dry, pointed tongue over her lower lip.

'Nothing unladylike, of course.'

'Of course not,' I agreed.

'But firm,' broke in Emerald, dragging at my dress as she spoke. 'Father said that must always come first.'

'Our father was a man of measureless wrath against a slight,' said my hostess. 'It is his continuing presence about the house which largely upholds us.'

'Shall I show her?' asked Emerald.

'Since you wish to,' said her sister disdainfully.

From somewhere in her musty garments Emerald produced a scrap of card, which she held out to me.

'Take it in your hand. I'll allow you to hold it.'

It was a photograph, obscurely damaged.

'Hold up the lamp,' squealed Emerald. With an aloof gesture her sister raised it.

It was a photograph of myself when a child, bobbed and waistless. And through my heart was a tiny brown needle.

'We've all got things like it,' said Emerald jubilantly. 'Wouldn't you think her heart would have rusted away by now?'

'She never had a heart,' said the elder sister scornfully, putting down the light.

'She might not have been able to help what she did,' I cried.

I could hear the sisters catch their fragile breath.

'It's what you do that counts,' said my hostess, regarding the discoloured floor, 'not what you feel about it afterwards. Our father always insisted on that. It's obvious.'

'Give it back to me,' said Emerald, staring into my eyes. For a moment I hesitated.

'Give it back to her,' said my hostess in her contemptuous way. 'It makes no difference now. Everyone but Emerald can see that the work is done.'

I returned the card, and Emerald let go of me as she stuffed it away.

'And now will you join us?' asked my hostess. 'In the inner room?' As far as was possible, her manner was almost casual.

'I am sure the rain has stopped,' I replied. 'I must be on my way.'

'Our father would never have let you go so easily, but I think we have done what we can with you.'

I inclined my head.

'Do not trouble with adieux,' she said. 'My sisters no longer expect them.' She picked up the lamp. 'Follow me. And take care. The floor has weak places.'

'Goodbye,' squealed Emerald.

'Take no notice, unless you wish,' said my hostess.

I followed her through the mouldering rooms and across the rotten floors in silence. She opened both the outer doors and stood waiting for me to pass through. Beyond, the moon was shining, and she stood dark and shapeless in the silver flood.

On the threshold, or somewhere on the far side of it, I spoke.

'I did nothing,' I said. 'Nothing.'

So far from replying, she dissolved into the darkness and silently shut the door.

I took up my painful, lost, and forgotten way through the wood, across the dreary marsh, and back to the little yellow road.

Never Visit Venice (1968)

Travel is a good thing; it stimulates the imagination. Everything else is a snare and a delusion. Our own journey is entirely imaginative. Therein lies its strength. – LOUIS-FERDINAND CÉLINE

Henry Fern was neither successful in the world's eyes nor unsuccessful; partly because he lived in a world society in which to be either requires considerable craft. Fern was not good at material scheming. His job stood far below his theoretical capacities, but he had a very clear idea of his own defects, and was inclined inwardly to believe that but for one or two strokes of sheer good fortune, he would have been a mere social derelict. He did not sufficiently understand that it has been made almost impossible to be a social derelict.

Not that Fern was adapted to that status any better than to the status of tycoon. Like most introverts, he was very dependent upon small, minute-to-minute comforts, no matter whence they came. Fern's gaze upon life was very decisively inwards. He read much. He reflected much. One of his purest pleasures was an entire day in bed; all by himself, in excellent health. He lived in a quite pleasant surburban flat, with a view over a park. Unfortunately, the park, for the most part, was more beautiful when Fern was not there; because when he was there, it tended to fill with raucous loiterers and tiny piercing radios.

Fern was an only child. His parents were far off and in poorer circumstances than when he had been a boy. He had much difficulty, not perhaps in making friends, but in keeping up an interest in them. There seemed to be something in him which made him different from most of the people he encountered in the office or in the train or in the park or at the houses of others. He could not succeed in defining what this difference was, and he simultaneously congratulated and despised himself for having it. He would sincerely have liked to be rid of it, but at the same time was pretty sure it was the best thing about him. If only others were interested in the best!

One thing it plainly did was hold Fern back in what people called his career. Here it did damage in several different ways. That it disconnected him from the network of favour and promotion was only the most obvious. Much worse was that it made favour and promotion seem to Fern doubtfully worth while. Worse still was that it made him see through the work he had to do: see that, like so much that is called work, it was little more than protective colouration; but see also that the blank disclosure of this fact would destroy not merely the work itself and his own income, but the hopes of the many who were committed to at least a half-belief in its importance, even when they chafed against it. Worst of all probably was the simple fact that this passionate division inside him ate up his energy and sent it to waste. Fern would have liked to be an artist, but seemed to himself to have little creative talent. He soon realised that it has become a difficult world for those who possibly are artists only in living. There is so little scope for practice and rehearsal.

Nor could Fern find a woman who seemed to feel in the least as he did. Having heard and read often that it is useless to seek for one's ideal woman, that the very fancy of an ideal woman is an absurdity, he at first made up his mind to concentrate upon the good qualities that were actually to be found, which were undoubtedly many, at least by accepted standards. He even became engaged to be married on two occasions; but the more he saw of each fiancée, despite her beauty and charm of character, the more he felt himself an alien and an imposter. Unable to dissemble any more, he had himself broken off the engagement. He had felt much anguish, but it was not, he felt, anguish of the right kind. Even in that he seemed isolated. The women must have realised something of the truth, because though both, when he spoke, expressed aggressive dismay, since marriage is so much sought after for itself, they soon went quietly, and were heard of by Fern no more. Now he was nearing forty: not, he thought, unhappy, when all was considered; but he could not do so much considering every day, and often he felt puzzled and sadly lonely. Things could be so very much worse, and that very easily, as none knew better than Fern; but this reflection, well justified though it was, did not prevent Fern from thinking, not infrequently, of suicide, or from letting the back of his mind dwell pleasurably and recurrently upon the thought of Death's warm, white, and loving arms.

One thing about which Fern felt true anguish was the problem of travel, or, as others put it, his 'holidays'.

Here the shortage of money really mattered. 'Why do I not go out for more?' he asked himself.

He had no difficulty in answering himself. Apart from the obvious doubt as to whether it was a good bargain to sell himself further into slavery in order to receive in return perhaps seven more days each year for travel and enough extra money to travel a little (a very little) more comfortably, he saw well that even these rewards might be vitiated by the extra care that would probably travel with the recipient of them. He realised early that, except for a few natural bohemians, travel can be of value only when based upon private resources: hence the almost universal adulteration of travel into organised tourism, an art into a science, so that the shrinking surface of the earth, in its physical aspect as in its way of life, becomes a single place, not worth leaving home to see. Fern saw this very clearly, but it was considerably too wide and theoretical a consideration to deter one so truly a traveller but who had yet travelled so little as Fern. What really held Fern back from travel, as from much else, was the lack of a fellow-traveller, remembering always that this fellow-traveller had to comply pretty nearly with an ideal which Fern could by no means define, but could only sense and serve, present or (as almost always) absent beyond reasonable hope.

He had shared a holiday with both his fiancées – one holiday in each case. Much the same things had happened each time; doubtless because men notoriously involve themselves (even when they do it half-heartedly) with the same woman in different shapes, or, perhaps, as Lord Chesterfield says, because women are so much more alike than are men. On each occasion, it had been two or three weeks of differing objectives, conscious and unconscious, at all levels, and, especially, of utterly different responses to everything encountered; but a matter also of determined and scrupulous effort on both sides not only to understand but to act upon and make allowances for the other's point of view. All these things had made of the holiday a reproduction of extension of common life, which was not at all what Fern had in mind. Both parties had, in the American formula, 'worked at' the relationship, worked as hard as slaves under an overseer; but the

produce was unmarketable. 'You're too soulful about everything,' complained one of the girls. She spoke quite affectionately, and truly for his own good, as the world goes, and as Fern perceived. None the less, he came to surmise that for him travel might be a mystical undertaking. He had some time read of Renan's concept that for each man there is an individual 'means to salvation': for some the ascent to Monsalvat, for some alcohol or laudanum, for some wenching and whoring, for some even the common business of day-to-day life. For Fern salvation might lie in travel; but surely not in solitary travel. And how much more difficult than ever this new consideration would make finding a companion! Almost, how impossible! Fern felt his soul (as the girl had called it) shrink when he first clearly sensed the hopeless conflict between deepest need and inevitable absence of response; the conflict which makes even men and women who are capable of better things live as they do. He and the girl were on a public seat in Bruges at the time; among the trees along the Dyver, looking at the swans on the canal.

At least politeness had been maintained on these trips; from first to last. It was something by no means to be despised. Moreover, when Fern had travelled with others, with a man friend, or with a party, he had fared considerably worse. Then there had been little in the way of manners and no obligation even to essay mutuality. In the longer run, therefore, Fern had travelled little and enjoyed less. This in no way modified his unwordly attitude to travel. He knew that few people do enjoy it, despite the ever-increasing number who set forth; and resented the fact that actual experience of travel had seemed, for practical purposes, to put him among the majority – of them, but not with them, as usual. Nor could he see even the possibility of a solution. Not enough money. Not enough time. And no intimates, let alone initiates. It had been quite bad enough even when he had only been twenty-five.

Fern began to have a dream. Foreshadowings or intimations came to him first; thereafter, at irregular intervals, the whole experience (in so far as it could be described as a whole), or bits or scraps of it, portions or distortions. There seemed to be no system in its total or partial recurrence. As far as Fern was concerned, it merely did not come often enough. He felt that it would be unlucky (by which he meant destructive) to note too

precisely the dates of the dream's reappearances. But Fern was soon musing about the content of the dream during waking hours; sometimes even by policy and on purpose. To the infrequent dream of the night, he added an increasing habit of deliberate daydreaming; a pastime so disapproved of by the experts.

Fern's dream, though glowing, was simple.

He dreamed that he was in Venice, where he had never been. He was drifting in a gondola across an expanse of water he had read about, called the Lagoon. Lying in his embrace at the bottom of the boat was a woman in evening dress or party dress or gay dress of some kind. He did not know how he had met her: whether in Venice or in London. Conceivably, even, he knew her already, outside the dream; had long known her, or at least set eyes on her. When he awoke, he could never remember her face with sufficient clarity; or perhaps could remember only for a moment or two after waking, in the manner of dreams. It was a serious frustration, because the woman was very desirable, and because between Fern and her, and between them only as far as Fern was concerned, was understanding and affinity. Such understanding could not last, Fern realised even in the dream: it might not last beyond that one night; or it might last as long as six or seven days. Fern could always remember the woman's dress: but it was not always the same dress; it was sometimes white, sometimes black, sometimes crimson, sometimes mottled like a fish. Above the boat, were always stars, and always the sky was a peculiarly deep lilac, which lingered with Fern and which he had never seen in the world exterior to the dream. There was never a moon, but behind the gondola, along some kind of waterfront, sparkled the raffish, immemorial, and evocative lights of Fern's hypothetical Venice. Ahead, in contrast, lay a long, dark reef, with occasional and solitary lights only. There were tiny waves lapping round the gondola, and Fern was in some way aware of bigger waves beating slowly on the far side of the reef. He never knew where the two of them were going, but they were going somewhere, because journeys without destination are as work without product: the product may disappoint, but is indispensible and has to be borne. Fern wished that he could enter the dream at an earlier point, so that he might have some idea of how he had met the woman, but always when awareness began, the pair of them were a

long way out across the water with the string of gaudy lights far behind. For some reason, Fern had an idea that he had met the woman by eager but slightly furtive arrangement, outside an enormous hotel, very fashionable and luxurious. The gondolier was always vague: Fern had read and been told that, since the advent of powered craft, gondoliers were costly and difficult. (None the less, this one seemed, whatever the explanation, to be devoted and amenable.)

The beginning and the end of the dream were lost in the lilac night. The beginning, Fern thought, the beginning of the whole, wonderful experience might have been only a few hours earlier. The end he hesitated to speculate about. Nor could he even, upon waking, remember anything that he and the woman had said to one another. A curious, disembodied feeling came back with him, however, and remained with him until the demands of the day ahead dragged him within minutes into full consciousness. He felt that his personal identity had been in partial dissolution, and that in some measure he had been also the night, the gondola, and even the woman with him. This sense of disembodiment he could even sometimes recapture in his daydreams, when circumstances permitted sufficient concentration. Above all, the dream, possibly more tender than passionate, brought a boundless feeling of plain and simple relief. Fern could not conceive of the world's cares ever diminishing to permit so intense a relief in waking life.

By day, more and more often, Fern saw himself in Venice. By night – on *those* nights – he was in Venice.

It had begun happening years ago, and he had still never been to Venice. The impact of Fern's dream upon waking existence seemed confined to the fact that when men and women spoke of their goals in life, as men and women occasionally do, referring to a sales managership or a partnership or a nice little cottage in the country or a family of four boys and four girls, Fern at once saw that lilac sky, heard the lapping of those tiny waves, felt a deep, obscure pain, and sensed an even greater isolation than usual.

He supposed that the dream was fragile. If thought about too practically, if analysed too closely, it might well cease to recur. The dream was probably best left in the back of the mind, at the edges of the mind; within that

mental area which comes into its own between waking and sleeping – and, less happily, between sleeping and waking.

Possibly, therefore, the dream had the effect of actually deterring Fern from looking out much more practical knowledge about Venice. All he knew about the place was scrappy, uncoordinated stuff ingathered from before the time when the dream had first visited him: for example, he had read a steam-rollered abridgement of Arthur Machen's Casanova translation, and, long before that, a costumed legend of Venice in the Renaissance by Rafael Sabatini, which belonged to his mother. Fern fully realised that, even geographically, the real Venice could hardly be much like his dream. And it scarcely needs adding that the woman in the dream seemed outside the bounds of possibility, let alone the money to pay for her and the gondola. Just as the real Venice could not resemble the dream Venice, so real life could not resemble life in the dream.

For years, then, Fern teetered along the tightrope between content and discontent; between mild self-congratulation and black frustration; between the gritty disillusionments of human intimacy and travel (for Fern the two became more and more inseparable), and the truth and power of his dream. It might be a twilight tightrope, but twilight was not an hour which Fern despised.

So when trouble was added unto Fern in the end, he failed for a long time to be aware of it. Then one spring day, and what was more, in the office, he suddenly realised that his dream had not returned for a long time. He thought that it must have been months since it had last visited him; perhaps more than a year. And, in consequence, he perceived that the dream of the day, always so much paler, of course, but normally, and given even reasonably right circumstances, almost summonable at will, had become totally bloodless and faintly hysterical. Instead of advancing to meet him half-way when he felt the need of it, it was more and more requiring to be conjured, even compelled. It had become much like an aspirin: an anodyne strictly exterior, and so a deceiver. Fern soon came to see that for months he had been standing naked against life's stones and spears without knowing it.

Even though it was the spring, always the most difficult season of the year, he looked himself over, confirmed that he was surviving, and seemed to

inaugurate an inner change. This was perhaps the moment, which comes to so many, when Fern simultaneously matured and withered. He became more practical, as people call it; less demanding of life.

He was sincerely astonished when during that same summer he was given significant promotion in his work. In due course, he was equally surprised to find that the additional responsibilities of his new position by no means outweighed the advantage of the greater pay, as he had always supposed they would; the truth being that the tendency is for all to carry the same responsibility, so that soon all will receive the same reward, if reward will any longer be the word. People felt vaguely but approvingly that Fern had taken more of a grip on himself. Fern, cheated of his dream, sometimes even felt something of the kind himself. Two or three years passed, while the land steadily receded beneath Fern's tightrope.

When the dream snapped off (as seemed to Fern to have happened, so abrupt had been discovery), its place was taken in the back and the edges of Fern's mind by the sentiment of death. 'God!' he had thought earlier, feeling pierced by a sword through the stomach, as, at that moment, we all do; 'God! I am going to have to die.' But in those days, with the rest of us, he had thought of it only occasionally. Now the thought was no longer an infrequent, stabbing shock. It was a soft-footed, never-absent familiar; neither quite an enemy to him nor quite a friend. The thought was steadily making Fern dusty, mangy, less visible; all in the midst of his perceptibly greater successfulness.

And it was almost as it it were these two things in conjunction, the new practicality and the faint, ever-spinning sentiment of death, that brought about Fern's ultimate decision actually to see Venice; as if he had abruptly said out loud, 'After all, a man should visit Venice before he dies.' With departure in sight, and upon the advice of an older man, he read the Prince of Lampedusa's *Gattopardo* in an English paperback. 'It happens to be about Sicily,' observed Fern's friend, 'but it applies to the whole of Italy, and it's concerned with the only thing that matters there, unless you're an actual archaeologist.' Fern gathered that the only thing which mattered was that Italy had undergone a great change.

II

Despite his ruminations and his hopes, Fern had never before travelled beyond France, the Low Countries, and Scandinavia, to all of which regions he considered himself comparitively acclimatised and much attached. By the time he found himself, as will shortly be seen, thinking once more about his dream, he had been in and around Venice for seventeen days, and they had been days of surprise, horror, fantasy, and conflict.

He could find kinship with no one. There was something terrifyingly insane about the total breakdown of the place: the utter discrepancy between the majesty and mystery of the monuments and the tininess of all who dwelt around them or came supposedly to gaze upon them. Fern looked upon these mighty works and despaired. Now he sat on an eighteenth-century stone bollard at the tip of the Punta di Salute, and summed it all up.

Many times Fern had read or been told that the great trouble with Venice was the swarm of visitors. You could hardly see the real people, he had always been informed. Indeed, the real people were often said to be dying out.

But by now it was the visitors who seemed to him a mere mist: a flutter of small, anxious sparrows, endlessly twittering, whether rich or poor, about 'currency' (Fern could fully understand only those who twittered in English); endlessly pecked and gashed by the local hawks; endlessly keeping up with neighbours at home, who were as unqualified to visit Venice as themselves. All visitors had at once too little time and too much. As he wandered down a *calle* or through a palazzo, he perceived that very few indeed of the visitors visited anything beyond the cathedral and seat of the former rulers; or saw much even of these, if only because of the crowd inside and the shouting of the guides, as mechanical and stereotyped as the swift mutterings of the priests.

The visitors sat about the Piazzo San Marco, proclaimed by so many wise voices as the world's most beautiful work of men (though infested with pigeons, shot or mutilated elsewhere in Italy), in a constant stew, rich or poor, about the prices: a preoccupation which was thoroughly justified. The women took off their shoes because they had walked a few hundred yards. They stuck out their poor legs, and, to do them justice, endeavoured intermittently but with pathetic unproficiency, to catch a life as it passed, to

utter the right cries. If life, their faces enquired, could not be caught in Venice, where could it be caught? For a few, right back at home, Fern felt; for the majority, no longer anywhere. Of the men, most were past even making the attempt. They sat looking foolish, fretful, bored, insufficiently occupied, and, above all, out of place. Nor could Fern but agree it was hard that one could not buy an aniseed or a cup of coffee in a place so beautiful without the beauty being tarnished by the price – a price probably unavoidable from the caterer's point of view, because of forces as uncontrollable by him as by Fern... And, of course, there were other visitors, mainly English, who despised the great and ancient monuments, structures on so different a scale from themselves, and spent their time poking their noses into what they conceived to be the 'real living and working conditions' of the Venetians.

It was not so much the visitors, with their fleeting passage, their phantom foreign money, that startled Fern, but these same Venetians. So far from the place being half empty, as he had been led to expect, it was swarming from edge to edge; and it swarmed with sentimental, self-satisfied philistines, more identical and mass-produced than he would have thought possible, inescapable except inside the faded, ill-kept palazzi where one had to pay to enter. Those among the Venetians who were not leeching on the visitors seemed to be industrial workers from the vast plants lined up across the water at Mestre; labour force to the war machines of a new invader holding the city under siege of modernity and required merely to await the inevitable self-induced collapse, much as the Turks waited for Byzantium to destroy itself.

The human din in Venice cancelled the quiet which might have been expected from the absence of Motor Moloch. It continued throughout the twenty-four hours, merely becoming after midnight more sinister, shrill, and unpredictable. Every night, gangs of youths screamed their way through the alleys. Folding iron shutters crashed like cannon through the early watches. Altercations, sexual or political, continued fortissimi in male voices for fifty minutes at a time. Fern, in his pension attic, would look at his watch and see it was two o'clock, three o'clock, four o'clock. The noise would diminish, he would fall asleep, and then there would be more screaming boys, more clanging shutters. It was a highly traditional uproar perhaps, but Venice

seemed to have an unhappy aptitude for combining only the worst of past society with the society of today. What might once have been falcons, had become hawks, and were now carrion crows.

Fern went to hear *Rigoletto* at the Fenice and to hear a concert with a famous conductor and a famous soloist: Both occasions were more than half empty, and such people as were there were either elderly Americans doing their duty by a dead ideal (often at the behest of their hotel porters) and intermittently slumbering, or dubious Italian youths, palpably with free seats and very concerned to make clear that fact to the fools who had paid. The performances in themselves seemed to Fern good, but that only made it worse. They seemed to be provided for a bygone generation, a bygone species of man, a world that had been laughed out of life and replaced by nothing.

Fern wandered through the shouting, pushing crowds, more and more sick at heart. As, at the concert, the beauty of the performance only made more poignant the entire absence of an audience, so, in the city at large, the incomparable magnificence and grace of the structures only made more dispiriting the entire absence of these qualities in the beholders. The stripped palaces, indifferently maintained even when a few rooms were 'open to the public', failed even to evoke their past. They would appeal only to those ultimate playboys who positively prefer their roses or their canals to be dead.

Fern found only one place that satisfied when regarded even as a ghost, and as thus offering life of a kind and in a degree. This was a suite of comparatively small bedrooms and dressing rooms and powder rooms high up in one of the remoter palaces, all fragile woodwork in faded green, red, and gold, with elaborate Murano looking-glasses; tender, canopied beds; and flowery dressing tables. These small, fastidious, flirtatious rooms, alone in all Venice, vouchsafed that frisson which is history. Obviously, few came near them, other than an occasional perfunctory cleaner, from year's end to year's end. This might spare the delightful rooms for their proper wraiths, but it also pointed to an insoluble dilemma.

In most of the palazzi, Fern could spend a morning or afternoon and see only a handful of his kind in the whole building, and all of them rushing

through in twenty minutes. Nor could this be sensibly objected to: with the destruction of their owners the palazzi had been destroyed also. It was offensive to pretend that these corpses still lived; odious to seek profit from their corruption.

Between the beauty of Venice and the people there was no link: not even of ignorant awe; perhaps that least of all. Much as the folk had pillaged the Roman villas, so Venice was being pillaged now; and Fern sensed that the very fact of the pillage being often called preservation implied that total dissolution was in sight. Venice was rotted with the world's new littleness. To many her beauty was actually antagonistic, as imposing upon them a demand to which they were unable to rise. Soon the Lagoon would be 'reclaimed' and the Venetian dream submitted to a new law of values; a puritan law antithetical to the law of pleasure that had prevailed there for so long; the terrain applied to the uses of the post-Garibaldian mass, existing only in its own expansion. Mestre and multiplication would compel unconditional surrender. The state of affairs that Fern now looked upon was more of a pretence, more of a masquerade than anything even in Venice's past. It was perhaps proper that Venice should end with a divertissement, but Fern felt that the fires of dawn were visible through the holes in the scenery; the decapitation overdue.

The Venetian dream?

Perched on his bollard, Fern realised with a start that he had been in Venice seventeen days, and not given a thought to his own dream.

During those seventeen days, he had not spoken to a single person except in the ways of triviality and cross-purposes. He never struck up acquaintance easily, but the conflictual impact of Venice, at once so lovely and so appalling, had transfixed him into even more of a trance than usual. He had wandered with a set stare; lost in a dream of another kind, a seemingly impersonal dream in which the dreamer had been the shadow. Big ships were passing quite frequently along the Canale della Giudecca to his left, into and out from the docks renewed by Mussolini. Unlike so much else, the ships were beautiful and alive at the same time. The scale of things contracted to the problems of one dreamer. Fern felt very lonely.

A manifest Englishman landed with an Italian youth from the *traghetto* at Fern's rear. He was bald and barrel-shaped. His large moustache and fringe of hair were ginger. He wore a brown tweed jacket buttoned across the stomach, dingy grey trousers, and an untidy shirt with a club tie. One might see him presiding knowledgeably over a weekend rally of motor cars in Surrey or Hampshire.

He walked out at the end of the stone promontory, dragging the Italian boy (in open white shirt and tight, bright trousers) by the hand. The Italian boy was making a girlish show of reluctance. The Englishman, a few feet away from Fern's bollard, pointed with his free hand to some object in the distance; something about which it was inconceivable to him that no one else should care, let alone a person for whom he himself cared so much. All the same, the boy did not care at all. He was no longer going through the motions of petulance, but stood quite still, looking blank, bored, resistant of new knowledge, and professionally handsome.

'Damn it!' said the Englishman, 'You might show some interest.'

The boy said nothing. An expression of dreadful disappointment and wild rage transfigured the Englishman's unremarkable face. He said something in Italian which Fern took to be at once bitter and obscene. At the same time, he threw away the boy's hand as if it had turned glutinous in his grasp. He then strutted off by himself towards the Zattere.

The Italian still stood looking fixedly at the paving stones. Then he thrust one hand into the back pocket of his trousers and produced a neat pocketbook: possibly a gift from the Englishman. After examining the contents with almost comic care, he returned the pocketbook to its place and strolled off. In pursuit, Fern imagined; thought he did not turn round to see. Judging from many experiences since his arrival, he thought that were he to do so, the next approach might be to him. He had found it a situation that put him at a loss in all its aspects. He simply could not live up to what was expected of a lone Englishman in Italy.

By now he felt so alone that he almost wished that he could. Hitherto in Venice he had been neither happy nor unhappy but simply amazed; on occasion aghast. Now the recollection of his dream had coincided with the

rapid dissolution of the perambulating philosopher in him. Acclimatisation to Venice had set in with a rush. The September breeze blew gently up the Canale di San Marco in Fern's face; sweet and cool, as it sighed for the slow sickness of Venice's stifling summer. The flashy motor-boats cackled and yelped around him, driving the gondolas to their death. Fern, thrust back upon his own life, passed his hand over his legs, his arms, his shoulders. He felt a pain he had almost forgotten during the years he had walked his tightrope.

What could Venice do for him but sadden him further? Fern decided to go home the next day; if the owner of the pension would permit him to depart ahead of his time. He rose, extended and contracted his legs, stumped up and down a bit, gazed for the last time upon one particularly incomparable Venetian prospect, and felt quite equal to weeping, had it not been for the self-consciousness of solitude in a foreign land.

He walked away.

III

That evening, Fern pushed his way along the Molo. He wanted no more unsettled business in his heart.

The owner of the pension had indicated that for a room in modern Venice, as for so much else, there is always a queue. He tried to charge Fern up to the end of the week, but did not try to keep him. Fern had already suspected that in the campaign between the visitors and the Venetians there are few clear-cut victories on either side.

Fern had even an excuse for his promenade. It was to be his last night in Venice, and, as he might have put it in his manly and practical aspect, 'You can't leave Venice without ever having been in a gondola.' Gondolas may not last much longer, nor may people. But gondolas, being no longer very functional, are not much good without someone to love on the journey.

On the Molo, Americans stood about, japing one another uneasily or over-confidently; wondering how to fill in before flying on to Athens or back to Paris the next morning; questing for highballs or local vintages on the

rocks. Uncontrolled Italian children and their plump, doting parents effortlessly dominated the prospect. Away to the south, over towards Chioggia, single lights gleamed romantically. The sky was turning to deep lilac and filling with festive, silvery stars.

Fern turned leftwards up an alley, where it was quieter, then wound about through dark courts and passages, like a beetle through a tome. Immediately he was alone, or almost so, among the great dark buildings, his mind returned to those small, elegant bedrooms and boudoirs at the top of the palazzo he had visited. The recollection of them made him shiver with the pathos of something so hopelessly irrecoverable that was still so hopelessly necessary. Thinking about them, feeling still the intensity of their atmosphere, he could smell the perfume of the Venetian decadence; that long century when the lion drowsed, awaiting Napoleon, the city fell irrevocably to pieces, and all the fashionable wore curious, enveloping masks, so that they looked partly like strange animals, partly like comedians, and partly like ravishers and ravished.

There was such a figure standing before him; dark and motionless against the rail along the side of a canal, which edged the small piazzetta Fern entered; neither quite in the light from the one lamp in the piazzetta, nor quite out of it. Fern slipped into a shadowy doorway and stared, silent and listening to his heartbeat.

On the other side of the canal loomed a formless stone structure, from all the windows of which seemed to shine an even, pale light, something between pink and blue; and Fern, whose hearing was at all times excessively acute, thought he could detect the faint echo of music and revelry seeping through the thick walls and closed casements. Then he realised that the pale light was the reflection of the late evening sky on the glass, and that the sound was no more than the general cry of Venice. He drew himself together.

Almost in silence down the canal came a gondola. Fern, however sharp his ears, could hear only the softest plash, plash, plash. Then the *ferro* came into view, and the gondola stopped by the figure against the railing. The gondolier seemed to be dressed in black. But Fern's attention was

concentrated upon the equally dark passenger; the person for whom the gondola had come.

At first, and in the most curious way, nothing more seemed to happen. The gondola just lay there in the faintly coloured dusk; with the gondolier almost invisible, and the presumed passenger still apparently waiting for someone or something, certainly making no motion to step aboard, indeed making no motion of any kind. Two middle-aged men, both dressed in light colours, crossed the piazzetta from the opposite corner, and proceeded in the direction from which Fern had come. They were talking loudly and simultaneously, in the usual way, and gave no sign of noticing the gondola and the figure by the railing. Of course, there was no reason why they should notice them. All the same, Fern felt that two or three minutes must have passed while the group remained motionless in dim outline against the vast stone building on the other side of the canal.

At least that length of time passed before it occurred to Fern that it might be for him they waited. He had set forth to destroy his dream (even though he had not expressed it quite like that) and thereby, as so often, might have wound up the mechanism for making it come true; because life goes ever crabwise, as the great Venetian, Baron Corvo, constantly proclaimed. Fern shrank back into his dark doorway. He feared lest the whiteness of his face give him away.

The strange set piece lingered for a few more moments. Then Fern realised that the figure which had been standing by the railings was now somehow in the gondola, and that the gondola was once more coming towards him. It glided down the side of the piazzetta, making only the ghost of a sound; the plash, plash, plash of the paddle might have been the wings of a night bird, or the trembling of Fern's own heart muscles. Five or six gay little children ran across the piazzetta in the line of the two men in grey. They were heavily preoccupied with abusing and hitting one another.

Peeping out, Fern saw that the passenger was still standing in the gondola, somewhat towards the bow. The whole course of events was too fanciful, so that Fern's only resolution was to withdraw. He was waiting until the disappearance of the gondola should make this possible. The gondola could hardly have taken more than a minute to pass, but before it had departed

from Fern's view, as he hid in his doorway, the standing passenger made a slight movement; from within the dark hooded cloak a woman looked straight into Fern's pale face, and seemed to smile in welcome. In an instant, the gondola was gone.

A narrow *fondamenta* continued alongside the canal from out of the piazzetta. Fern ran to the corner and hastened after the vanishing boat, which seemed now to be travelling very much faster. As he sped on, his shoes clattering on the stones, he wondered if insidious Venice had promoted an insanity in him, a mad confusion between dream and dread. He was pretty sure that, if he should run at all, he should by rights run in the opposite direction. But having started to run, having begun such a disturbance of the night, he had to run on. He nearly managed to overtake the boat just as it was passing under the next bridge. One would have been convinced that the gondolier at least must have heard him and seen him, but the gondola slid on undeflected. Fern realised that beyond the bridge the *fondamenta* did not continue. He stood on the crest of the arch and watched. He did not care, had no title, to call after. The stones of Venice closed softly over the departing shadow.

And then, only twenty or thirty minutes later, something happened which explained these small but singular events.

Deep in thought, and troubled in soul, Fern strolled back to the wide promenade which faces the Canale di San Marco and is the principal waterfront of the city. The distance from the piazzetta of the odd events was not great, but in Venice, for better or for worse, one can seldom walk straight ahead and unobstructed for more than a few paces, and Fern, his mind in any case on other things, lost himself in a small way at least twice. In the end, he emerged on the Riva degli Schiavoni. Everything was brightly illuminated, the sky was perfect, and Fern reflected that, after all, Venice did look rather festive, even a trifle exalted, as she should do. But his mind was on his own loneliness, and on his dream: if, at this late hour, he had, after all, made a tiny concession to Venice, he wanted someone with whom to join hands on it, wanted that person badly. Even so, he stood still, uncertain whether to turn leftwards where it would be quieter, or rightwards where adventure was more likely. Now that the chance had gone, he very

positively wished that he had spoken to the woman in the piazzetta. It could hardly have been a matter of life or death. Fern trembled slightly. He was indeed an irresolute creature. By now, reason told him, it could hardly matter less which way he turned.

He simply lacked the heart, the energy, the curiosity to wander off towards the darker area to the left; to take a brisk solitary constitutional along the front, safe except perhaps from cutpurses, as his father would certainly do, and think nothing of it, indeed be all the better for it. Fern turned towards Danieli's (a line of American women leaned like beautiful wasting candles over the rail of the roof-garden, high above); towards the Piazza; towards life, in the commercial or Thomas Cook connotation of the word.

Within a minute or two, he thought he saw again the woman whose face he had seen so momentarily in the gondola.

She was standing by herself in much the same way at the edge of the canal, though this time it was the Canale di San Marco, almost the sea. She was still wearing the hooded black cloak, as in a picture by one of the Longhis, but was no longer so muffled in it. It looked to Fern that beneath it she was wearing a spreading, period dress. Despite the crowd, which had by no means ceased to push and bawl in his ears, he was really frightened. He did not put the thought into words within his head, but his thought was that this was an apparition, and that he was having a breakdown. The figure stood there so motionless, so detached from all those vulgar people, so spectrally apparelled; and, of course, so recurrent. As in the piazzetta, he stood and stared; not unlike a ghost himself. Everything faded but that single figure.

Then she walked steadily towards him, twenty or thirty-five yards, and spoke.

'English?'

She really was dressed in an eighteenth-century style, and beneath her hood Fern could see piled-up hair.

'Yes,' said Fern. 'English.'

'The city of Venice would like to invite you for a gondola trip.'

Here indeed was an explanation: at least within limits. She was connected with 'publicity' and was merely dressing the part. It was an explanation all too consistent with what Fern had seen of the place. He laughed a little too brashly, a little too brusquely.

But no doubt she was accustomed professionally to all gradations of oafishness.

'Complimentary, of course,' she said.

That, thought Fern, was like the Venice he had so far seen.

The woman was an Italian and did not speak words such as *complimentary* with ease.

'Are you alone?' asked the woman.

'Yes,' said Fern. 'Quite alone. You must invite someone else. I don't qualify.'

'But you do qualify,' said the woman. 'The city of Venice wants to help lonely visitors.'

It sounded ghastly, but the woman spoke with an aspect of sincerity that at least made it possible to reply with reasonable self-respect.

'Tell me more,' said Fern.

'We go in a gondola,' explained the woman, speaking carefully, in the way of professional guides, as if to a backward child, 'along the Grand Canal and across the Lagoon.'

It was not the manner in which Fern had visualised the realisation of his dream, but no doubt it was the dream which controlled the situation, and not he. Just then he could hardly be expected to think it all out.

'We?' enquired Fern. 'How many will there be?'

'Just you and I.' She said it with the dignity that certain Italian women can bring to statements that many other women can utter only with a blush and giggle or excessive explanation.

'And, of course, the gondolier,' she added with a beautiful smile.

'I shall be very pleased,' said Fern. 'Thank you.' He managed to accept with some degree of the same simplicity.

'There you are,' she said, using perhaps not quite the right idiom, and pointing to a gondola. Fern, even though apprehensive of capsizing the unknown craft, managed to hand her in as if to the manner born. They settled side by side on the cushions. Her cloak and wide skirt beneath spread themselves over his legs. She had neither spoken to the gondolier nor, as far as Fern had noticed, even looked at him. He cast off in silence, and they were out on the canal, with the other side, the Isola di San Giorgio Maggiore looking disproportionately nearer almost of the instant. Fern tried to squint backwards in order to examine the gondolier, but it was difficult to see more than his shoes.

Fern squinted backwards a second time. They were not shoes. They were black feet.

But now there was nothing to worry about: indeed, when things were rightly conceived, there never had been anything to worry about. 'I think I saw you earlier this evening,' said Fern conversationally. 'On one of the narrower canals.'

'People often see me, but it is only a few that I can call,' she replied in her not quite perfect idiom.

She began to describe the sights they were passing. Fern knew most of them already, and more about them than the basic information deemed appropriate for Anglo-Saxon visitors. All the same, he liked listening to her deep voice and was often charmed by the way she put things. The effect of her simple tale was quite different when one was alone with her, he felt, than it would have been if she had been speaking to a crowd of tourists. They entered the Grand Canal. Just visible across the water to the left was

the bollard on which that same afternoon Fern had summed up his conflictual condemnation; had sentenced Venice to depart from his life the next morning.

Fern continued listening respectfully, but by now he could feel the warmth of her body, and the spreading of her stiff skirt over his legs was delightful. It was difficult to listen indefinitely to such topographical platitudes when there was so much else that might be said, and doubtless a limit on the time.

He must have conveyed something of discontent to her because it seemed to him that her flow of facts (not all of them facts, either, he rather thought) began to falter. As they were traversing the few seconds of darkness under the Ponte dell'Accademia, she said, 'Perhaps you know Venice as well as I do?' Her tone was not peevish but friendly and solicitous, and Fern decided at once that it was a most unusual thing for a professional guide, always fearful of losing all justification for existence if any real knowledge on the part of the visitor is admitted. Fern's heart warmed to her further.

'I'm sure not,' he said. 'I've been here just over two weeks. Just long enough to know that two months are needed or perhaps two years.'

'If I go beyond the obvious things, I get into what you call deep waters.'

'I can well imagine,' replied Fern, not necessarily imagining very clearly. 'Let's stick to the obvious things.'

Fern, when he thought about it, could see and hear that the Canal Grande, most beautiful thoroughfare in the world (as so many have said), was its usual horrible self, loaded with roaring power-craft, congested with idiot tourists, lined with darkened palaces that should have been alive with lights; but he found that for once he was hardly thinking about it at all. He even reflected that he was glad the power-craft made his own progress slower; though it was, as ever in modern Venice, hard on the black gondolier.

'It was all so beautiful once.'

Fern could hardly believe his ears. He had so far found it a point of honour among Venetians not to admit that things had ever been better than they

were now. He believed, indeed, that most of them were quite sincerely unaware of the fact.

Fern took his companion's hand. It seemed a very soft and unprofessional hand, and she let it lie in his undisturbed.

She spoke again. 'There is a rich American woman further back who has collected all the ugliest things in the world. You could never believe how ugly and how many. She keeps them in a half-built palazzo, which she never finishes. I could not bring myself to spoil so nice an evening by pointing it out.'

'I know about her,' smiled Fern. 'I've been there.'

'Can such a woman be capable of love?'

They were slowly passing the Palazzo Rezzonico.

'Never the time and the place and the one capable of love, said the English poet.' Fern was rather surprised by himself.

A speed-boat full of white-shirted youths whizzed across their bows, almost capsizing them.

'It will be better out on the Lagoon,' said Fern's companion, drawing up her feet. 'Less interference and more real danger.'

Fern could not be sure what exactly she meant, but she seemed to find the prospect pleasurable, because her eyes gleamed for a second inside her hood as she spoke.

'Why danger?'

'At night there is always some danger out on the Lagoon.' She said it placidly, perhaps with a faint potentiality of contempt. Fern did not risk making the potential actual.

However curious Fern was about her, he asked no personal questions. He probably felt that they could elicit only inappropriate answers, but more

important was the fact that he found the relationship easy and delightful, just as it was. Particularly unwise would have been any reference to the many others with whom she must have made this excursion, 'lonely people': Fern knew it was an odious cliché. It had never before occurred to Fern as possible that what was, after all, companionship on a business basis could so touch his real feelings. Least of all was it the way in which he had dreamed it.

But now she seemed to have shrunk away into the blackness. Fern still held her hand, but he felt that the racket around them, the emptiness of the palaces, spread a paralysing infection of disillusionment. He too began to long for the Lagoon.

He decided that sincerity was best.

'I really didn't mean to stop you talking. I was enjoying it.'

'I have nothing to tell which you do not know already.' Her voice was muffled by the black garment into which she had withdrawn.

'I used to have a dream,' said Fern in something of a rush. 'For years I dreamt that I was doing – exactly what I am doing now.'

'Venice is everyone's dream,' she replied. 'Venice *is* a dream.'

'With no reality?'

'The reality is what you call a nightmare.'

They were within two or three hundred yards of the Rialto bridge, high and wide with the marble bowers of ancient jewellers and poison-sellers. Here the scene on both sides of the canal was more animated; people sat at waterside café tables; a barge ploughed up and down bearing massed singers of 'O Sole Mio' and 'Torna a Surriento.' Many people were at least attempting to enjoy themselves.

'The city fathers would hardly approve of your calling Venice a nightmare,' said Fern, pressing her hand.

'The city fathers, as you call them, are all dead. Everyone in Venice is dead. It is a dead city. Do you need to be told?'

Then Fern got it out; put it into words. 'I need you to love me.'

Amid the glare of the café lights, and the booming of the drum, he lifted himself on to his elbow and looked down at her elusive face, cased in its dark hood.

She said nothing.

'Make my dream come true. Love me.'

She still did not speak. Now they were actually abreast of the man with the vast drum. He shouted something light-hearted and scatological as the gondola toiled past the broken water. Boom, boom, boom, boom.

'Make my life worth while. Redeem me.'

From the depths of her black cloak she looked into his eyes.

'You said you dreamed no longer. Do you know why?'

'I think I began to despair of the dream coming true.'

The dream stopped when you decided to visit Venice. Never visit Venice.'

She stirred, withdrew her hand, and kissed him softly with cool lips.

'Set me free,' said Fern. 'Give me peace.'

In the long darkness beneath the Ponte di Rialto, he put his hand on the tight bodice over her breast. When they emerged, his arms were so fast around her that nothing could ever part them. The sorters in the Post Office on the Fondamenta dei Tedeschi perceived this and called shrilly. It was rare to see anyone in a gondola except the elderly and exhausted, with death making a busy third at the paddle.

There was no more for Fern to say except endearments. On and up past the dark palaces went the gondola, ploughing and labouring, tilting and rocking, as powered craft, large and small, shot past like squibs and rockets. The very extremity and eccentricity of the consequent, artificial motion added to the isolation as Fern made love on the deep, velvety cushions. Their black gondolier must have had the tirelessness of a demiurge, so regular and relentless was their advance.

'You are the moon and the stars,' said Fern. 'You are the apples on the tree, the gold of the morning, the desire of the evening. You are good, you are lovely, you are life. You are my heart's delight.'

The Palazzo Vendramin-Calergi came into sight.

'Isolde!' said Fern tenderly.

He had found a travelling companion.

'Tristan!' she replied, entering into the spirit of it.

'Perhaps that was when Venice died?' suggested Fern. 'When *Tristan and Isolde* was composed here.'

'If Venice every really lived!' she retorted.

But the gondolier changed the subject for them by turning off the Grand Canal on to the Rio di San Felice. They were bound for the wide waters of the Lagoon.

In the Sacca della Misericordia, the almost square bay on the Venetian north shore, all was silent. There are no footways and in the buildings was only an occasional dim light, suggesting a rogue tenant, even now up to no good.

'Is this where the danger begins?' asked Fern.

She made no reply, but drew even closer. Beneath the dim, lilac amphora of the sky, she was all black or white, like Pierrot. The gondolier, with strokes as strong and regular as if he were swinging a scythe, swept them forward to their consummation.

Here, to the north of Venice, the Lagoon was incandescent. It seemed to Fern, who had never seen it like this before, a nearer word than phosphorescent, because the light which gleamed from the water, faintly around the gondola, but in distant patches quite brightly, was multicoloured, blue, white, yellow, pink; and always with lilac in it too, from the infusion of the sky. There were small glittering waves, and vast, indefinite areas of coloured froth or scum, like torn lace. Already it was a little colder.

They approached an island. Fern saw the white shape of a Renaissance church and, extending from it along the entire shore, a high wall, as of a prison or asylum. Ranged in the small piazzetta before the church door was a line of figures, indistinct in respect of age, sex, or costume, but each bearing a lighted Venetian lantern, a decorated light on a decorated pole, a device, here, now, and always one of the distinctive splendours of Venice. The figures seemed to agitate the lanterns almost frenziedly, in welcome to Fern and his companion, but from the group Fern could hear no sound, though by now they were less than a hundred yards away, and the whiteness of the church behind them was luminous as a leper's face.

'Isn't it San Michele?' whispered Fern. 'The cemetery island, where at night no one stays?'

'The dead stay. By this time, no one knows how many of them. All who permit themselves to be taken from their beds, dressed in the streets, and buried.' She pressed her soft cool lips on his to dismiss the thought.

When Fern looked up once more, they were almost past the island. The lines of figures with the gorgeous lanterns lay far astern, though the lanterns were still tilting at odd, wild angles. It occurred to Fern that the figures were not expecting the gondola to stop, but had come out in order to speed it on its way, as it might be the barge of Bianca Capello. He saw that the lights were now higher in the air, as the poles were lifted joyously to their full length. But there was still no sound beyond the sounds of night and the sea.

Out here, while the small, scattered navigation lights flickered and bickered, Fern could see that, in places, the water was not merely faintly radiant but transparent right down to the wrack and garbage settled on the bottom from

earliest times. In other places, it was opaque, sometimes as if great volumes of powder had been dissolved in it, and sometimes as if it were effervescent and gaseous. Every now and then Fern could see bones, human or animal, arranged in dead seaweed, or a hideous pile of discarded domesticities, or a small, vague underwater mountain, not quite mineral, not quite vegetable, not quite animal, but riddled and crawling with life of a kind, notwithstanding. Big lumpy fish and pale grey and pink serpentine creatures, elaborately devious in structure, glided in and out of the clear patches, sometimes seeming almost to gambol round the gondola, occasionally breaking surface for a second, with a gasp and croak. Everywhere was an entanglement of seadrift, rotted but constantly self-renewing. The north shore of Venice, always the dark side of the city, was now a necklace of single lamps round the throat of the night: the different floors and the buildings were levelled off by distance and amalgamated with the public lamp posts of the Fondamenta Nuove. Over on the left of the gondola, the ancient glassworks of Murano, working day and night to produce brittle joys for visitors, thrust quick swords of fire into the encroaching blackness.

Further than Murano it seemed impossible for even this gondolier to continue with so much power; but there was no sign of flagging.

'He is a strong man,' said Fern.

'Here there is a current,' replied his companion. 'Here the struggle ends.'

Fern perceived that they had indeed changed direction. Ahead lay a long dark shore, as in his dream. But he knew quite well what it was. It was the Litorale; the long, narrow, reef strengthened and sustained through the ages to prevent the high seas or the Adriatic from entering the Lagoon and eroding Venice; a reef penetrated by three gaps or *porti*, through which shipping passed, one of which, Fern knew, must be somewhere ahead, the Porto di Lido, standing at the north of that notorious wilderness of pleasure. He realised now where their journey would end. Where else could an official tour of Venice terminate but at Lido?

'We leave the Laguna Morta and enter the Laguna Viva,' said his guide.

Fern was not sure that this was exactly accurate; but it did not really matter, because the next thing she said was, 'This is the moment of love,' and because that, for some little time, was what it proved to be.

After so many mortal years, Fern's dream was proving more than true. Fern was proving himself right and the rest of the world wrong.

Now the sky was at last completely black, the stars gave little light, and the effulgent Lagoon was becoming the sombre sea. Upon all the black gondolier must have looked down, with more time to stare, now that his work was lighter, but about him it did not seem to Fern the moment to concern himself. To Fern, life had become an affair of moments only; a present without past, without future.

How long had passed by the hands of Fern's watch, he never knew, because when, somewhat later, he looked at his watch, he found that it had stopped.

IV

When first he stirred, he realised that a fairly stiff breeze was blowing round the little craft. The gondola was tossing and plunging quite seriously.

Fern drew himself up and looked round. There were biggish waves, and the scanty lighting at the northern, garrison end of Lido, instead of lying ahead, was distinctly to the leftward, the garish glow of the pleasure grounds completely out of sight: to all intents and purposes, Fern realised with a shock, the lights of the Lido pleasure area were *behind* them. It was somewhere in this watery region that on the Festa de Sensa the Doge at the prow of the *Bucentaur*, loveliest vessel in the world, each year married the sea. It startled him that his own strange marriage had found its culmination just there. This was when Fern looked at his watch.

Then he twisted right round, for the first time since he had entered the boat, and, kneeling on the keel, looked straight back to the gondolier. Then he had his third and greatest shock. There was no one there at all. The gondola was merely being swept out to sea on the current. It came to Fern that, even though there are said to be but small tides or no tides in the Mediterranean, yet the very expression *Laguna Morta* referred to areas 'under water only at

high tides'; and that now the Lagoon was emptying, pouring out through the relatively narrow breach ahead.

When Fern first roused himself after the moment of love, he had left his companion remuffled in her black cloak, soft, small, and silent. Now he turned to where she lay beside him. He could not decide what first to say. It seemed terrible to speak at once of the mere practical circumstances, and worse if the circumstances were of danger, as he could not doubt they were. He was appalled by the surmise that the gondolier, strong as he was, had been somehow swept from the boat, while the two of them had been lost in passion and the spell of the night. Gently, he put out his hand and drew away the black hood. Then, in the solitude of the sea and against the rising wind, Fern screamed out loud. Inside the black hood was a white skull; and an instantaneous throwing back of the entire black cloak, revealed inside it only an entire white skeleton.

V

At the Porto di Lido, the main entrance to the harbour of Venice, two very long stone breakwaters run far out to sea. There was no question for Fern of a storm having arisen, or of any serious change at all in the weather. The change was merely that brought about by leaving a more or less still and dead pool for the living, unpredictable ocean. Even the wind which so alarmed Fern was little more than the breeze encountered in almost all regions when one embarks seriously upon open waters. Between the Porto Di Lido breakwaters, therefore, vessels passed in and out in fair numbers, hardly sentient of the racing ebb which for a single gondola was so formidable.

Fern, in fact, passed no fewer than four incoming ships; and two others overtook him. Some of them came far too close to his uncontrolled cockleshell, but his wild shouting and waving reached never a soul aboard any of them, so black was the night, so black his craft, in accordance with the decree of 1562. Between the long breakwaters, the passing ships were the obvious danger: it was certainly not rough, though it was reasonably unpleasant for a man pitching about in a vessel so small as a gondola. The possibility of the gondola, instead of being run down, sinking beneath him,

did not, therefore, seriously occur to him until the real sea was drawing quite near.

He shrank forward to the peak of the vessel, so as to separate himself from his now terrible companion, and squatted before the tall iron ferro, only a few inches ahead. The ferro would surely drag the boat down all the faster when the moment came.

At the very end of the leftward or San Erasmo breakwater, the shorter of the two, Fern could just make out a large inscription daubed by supporters of the previous Italian regime, and never obliterated owing to difficulty of access – and perhaps other things. It was to the effect that a simple hour as a lion is to be preferred to a lifetime as an ass.

And now there was only the Lido breakwater and, afterwards, the turbulent, nocturnal Adriatic. The gondola sped on like a black leaf on a millstream.

Fern had proved his resolution to leave Venice before the morrow night.

Into The Wood (1968)

At night those unfortunates who suffered from insomnia or nightmare used to wander about in the fields or the woods, trying to reach a pitch of exhaustion that would give them back the power of sleep. Among the afflicted creatures were people from the upper classes, well-educated women – why, there was even a parish priest! – AUGUST STRINDBERG ('Inferno')

These areas are not uncommon if you know how (or are compelled) to look for them. As men and women work more and more against nature, nature works more and more against men and women. All the same, a few of the areas are of long acceptance; dating back to the earliest memory of man, as the international lawyers put it. Some of them, in the beginning, were probably holy places of the pre-Christians; of whom a few even now survive on our continent, if, once more, you know how (or are driven) to look for them. Sometimes one is amazed to discover how little that is real or true ever finds its way into general knowledge: in so far, of course, as general knowledge is still an expression with meaning.

*

'Harry and Molly Sawyer' was what they had printed on their Christmas Cards; with an address in a Cheshire town that was hardly a town any more, but a sprawling and sleeping area for Manchester. Harry Sawyer's business card indicated that he was an 'Earth Mover', though when one met him he seemed to have neither the back muscles of Atlas nor the mental leverage of Archimedes, nor yet the power to shake the world of Marx or Hitler; and when one saw his yellow, space-fiction machines on the move, each withSAWYER painted in black capitals on all four sides, each able to pulp a platoon of soldiers at a swing of the beam, one wondered how long he could possibly hope to keep them under control.

Margaret Sawyer saw as little of the yellow monsters as she could, and, with the other well-to-do Manchester wives, strove for domestic realisation

among an ever-growing assembly of lesser monsters, all whirring, spinning, and chopping, in kitchen, washroom, and lounge. Among other things, the gadgets ('gadflies', she once thought) were supposed to give her more time for her children, two girls and a boy; but it seldom worked that way. Margaret could hardly hope to be happier than the other Manchester wives; but until one night in Sweden, she would have rejected the idea that she was positively unhappy. Nor was she: until that night she was insufficiently grown for happiness or unhappiness; might well have been among those who express doubt as to whether the words mean very much.

Sawyer had to visit Sovastad, on the eastern side of central Sweden; where a big, wide, dangerous, costly road was being built across the mountains into Norway. As he would have to stay there at least a week, the Swedes, hospitable ever, had suggested that he bring Margaret with him. Those of the Swedish wives who were not pursuing careers of their own, would be able to look after her during the day, and see that she had a good time. Margaret had acquiesced: one could not use a stronger word.

And so, on the whole, it had worked out. Margaret had never been so thoroughly and efficiently looked after in all her previous life; never had so concentrated a good time. There was a highpowered, unflagging, day-and-night cordiality among the richer Swedes, to which she was totally unaccustomed, and which by the end of the week, she found very exhausting, though she would have hesitated to say so, even to herself because back in Cheshire, she had supposed it to be the very thing she wanted. Harry also grew quieter and quieter. He admitted to her that he found Swedish businessmen and business methods very hard going. 'Particularly the younger men,' he said. 'They're so keen and sharp, they take the skin off your hands, and then they turn round and deliver a lecture about British Imperialism and what's wrong with our hospitals. You can't tell where you stand at all.'

Nor, despite the social whirlwind, did Margaret find Sovastad a jocund town. It straggled along the shore of a vast, black lake, described as one of the biggest not only in Sweden but in Europe; and the high mountains to the west cut off the sun half-way through the day, darkened the streets, and made the water look like tar. The lake was said to be so deep as never to

have been fathomed, and, as often in such cases, to harbour a creature of enormous bulk, terrifying aspect, species unknown to zoology, and origin unknown to all. There were many representations of this beast in the conscientious provincial museum, round which Margaret was conscientiously conducted by three Swedish ladies, all better dressed than she was and better preserved also, all erudite about the exhibits, in a manner unimaginable in Manchester. In late mediaeval woodcuts, the creature appeared with protuberant eyes, a forked tongue, and a thick circle of whiskers like seaweed. In eighteenth-century guides to natural philosophy, it had quietened down into the likeness of a baroque ceiling embellishment. A century later, with the advance of the scientific attitude, the most barbaric devices had been constructed by the locals to trap and kill it. They were all faithfully exhibited, and the Swedish ladies explained in detail how they would have worked. Margaret was glad that there had been no occasion.

'So the creature's still in the lake?' she asked. She could not pronounce the Swedish name for the monster.

'The children think so,' replied the Swedish ladies.

The lake was, in fact, named after it, they explained: 'Lake Orm', meaning 'serpent'. It was one of the few Swedish words Margaret felt able more or less to manage. The high tessitura in which the language is spoken, the combination of breadth and altitude in the vowel sounds, were quite beyond her. All the same, a guidebook to the district which she came upon later, said that the name of the lake originated merely in its serpentine periphery, with long arms reaching into the mountains like tentacles.

Sovastad, Margaret decided, was a little too small for its pretensions. The Swedes made the very most of every urban feature, designing them splendidly, using them fully, but the population was not big enough to prevent the rocks struggling through in almost every street and prospect, and determining the prevailing ethos. By half past three in the afternoon, the feeling would set in that this was a community almost as involved in a ceaseless struggle with harsh natural forces as a colony of Esquimaux. There was every amenity, but they were a little like the comforts of an air force base with a bitter war on its hands. Not that Margaret could think of any better adaptation to the forbidding rocks and endless winter, to which

much reference was made, jocular but surprisingly grim also. Beyond doubt, the Swedes had done wonders, but a feeling of strain was pervasive. Perhaps only a newcomer, a visitor from abroad, would be aware of it.

At the same time, there was always in Sovastad a faint mistiness, a clammy softness; or, when the sun was striking directly down, an expectation of it. It too seemed to pervade the communal life; in the hectic quality of which was something almost Russian. When the sun did strike, the faint, vague mist seemed to make it still hotter. Then, very quickly, the high mountains would cut off the radiance, and within a quarter of an hour, Margaret would feel as chilled as previously she had felt warmed. She would have liked to wear trousers, but Henry implied that it would diminish their status, already none too secure. When Margaret pointed out how many of the Swedish women wore them, he inevitably replied that this was one of the very reasons why she shouldn't.

Henry's attitude, and the possibility of consequent dissension between them, was the main reason, as far as Margaret was concerned, for their going on Sunday for a drive through the mountains by car, instead of for a trek on foot, which the Swedes had suggested in the first place. She could hardly, she felt, go mountaineering in a two-piece from Kendall, Milnes and frail, almost cocktail-time shoes; especially when so many continentals tended to adopt near-battledress for even an afternoon walk. The Swedes would laugh at her, and, however she dealt with the situation, Henry would sulk. It was remarkable how deeply men seemed to feel such things when their attitude to the whole question of clothes was almost always so entirely negative.

Therefore they went, six of them, by car, higher and higher, along roads very unlike the ones which Henry was building to a scale that was not human. The conifers that cover so much of Sweden, the pools, quagmires, and small lakes that occupy so much of the land area, were sad, and, at the same time, slightly mysterious and equivocal, but Margaret became aware of a spell in the very monotony, even though she was seated in the back of the big Volvo with a married couple eager that she miss absolutely nothing. The spell lay perhaps in the monotony and the boundlessness combined: already she had seen much landscape like this on the way up from Stockholm, she knew that it extended all the way northwards to the

commencement of the tundra, and she had become aware how different are Swedish distances from their aspect in the ordinary school atlas. There were no footpaths through the trees, such as still survive through most woodlands in England; no tracks; no apparent access to the woods at all except by struggle. It was not so much that these millions of conifers would be likely to conceal a huge, lost city or a race of pygmies, but rather that they might of themselves generate and diffuse forces quite outside their arboricultural aspects, forces which one might have to tramp far and long to sense, because it might take much time and distance to disengage oneself sufficiently from machines like Henry's, from life like that in the Cheshire subtopia.

They reached a high place. The car stopped and they got out. 'Don't leave the road,' said the Swedes. 'You'll sink above your ankles.' Margaret thought it was an exaggeration, but it was still odd that women were required to array themselves primarily as erotic objects, even on the most unsuitable occasions, even when they had passed forty, even when the last thing that men like Henry seemed to think of was eroticism, anyway where his wife was concerned. Moreover, there was a wind blowing with a filter of ice behind it, to which Margaret was unaccustomed in England.

Still she gazed around, conscious of the spell. From this height, there were dark-green trees to the edges of the earth. Directly below, like a big, irregular rent in the greenery, spread the Orm, all of it visible at once; the square miles of black pool beside which stood the puny town; the winding, octopus arms stretching towards her. Sovastad looked like a cluster of limpets on the hard rock; or like the first town that men had built. The line of the new road made another tear in the woodlands, but outside Sovastad there was hardly a building to be seen in the entire panorama.

When, however, in a few steps they reached the top of the ridge, with a similar vast expanse of green to the west, Margaret saw that on this side a single structure rose fairly near at hand from the trees on the westward side of the mountains. It was a sizeable, wooden edifice, painted white, and with a slate roof.

'Who lives there?' asked Margaret, making conversation.

'It is the Kurhus. A sanatorium,' said one of the Swedish wives.

'It is not only for the sick,' explained the other Swedish wife.

'It is a place where people stay, but where there is treatment too, if you want it.'

'What you call a rest cure,' added one of the Swedish husbands.

From what Margaret had seen of Swedish life, she was not surprised.

'It has fallen out of fashion,' observed the second Swedish husband. 'People have no time for rest cures today.'

'Your country has the reputation of having more welfare than anywhere else,' Margaret could not help observing.

'Welfare is not rest,' replied the Swede; speaking quite severely.

'The Kurhus would do better to move with the times and become a motel,' said the other Swede. 'Business men today often prefer to sleep outside the city, provided there is a good road.'

'It must have a wonderful view, and the afternoon sun and the sunset too,' remarked Margaret. In Sovastad, there were no sunsets.

'That is true,' said one of the Swedish women seriously. 'The Kurhus sees the sinking sun. It is appropriate.'

No more was said on the subject, but, after they had gone for a little walk along the ride (Margaret would gladly have continued much further), they drove a short distance along the western flank of the mountain before returning to Sovastad, and actually passed the Kurhus portal. Flowers hung from baskets and a number of people were sitting about at tables on a terrace. To Margaret, it did not look in the least out of fashion or unsuccessful. Indeed, she liked the look of it very much: especially the contrast between the small but elegant sophistications of decor and the immense wild prospect extending north, south, and west under the warm sun. The new road had not yet reached this side of the mountains, and

Margaret had no idea whether it ever would. Since they had come to Sweden, Henry seemed to experience such difficulty in holding on to the the various rights and duties of his position that he had never found breathing-space to go into such geographical particulars with her.

Two days later, in fact, things rose to a crisis. In the middle of the morning, Henry routed Margaret out of a *konditori*, where she was consuming successive cups of excellent but expensive coffee, and told her that he would have to go back for the next two nights to Stockholm, and that their departure for England would have to be postponed until at least two days after that. 'I shall be obliged to come back here again, dammit,' said Henry. 'I must make sure that they really understand what Stockholm has decided.'

'What a pest for you!' said Margaret.

'Will you come to Stockholm with me, or would you prefer to stay here till I come back? I'm sure the Larssons and the Falkenbergs will give you a good time.'

'I don't want much more good time just for the present. May I go and stay at the Kurhus?'

Henry looked doubtful. 'They said it wasn't up to much.'

'That might mean it's quiet. Of course, I mustn't keep the room in the hotel here at the same time, but I'm sure you can arrange something.'

'Never mind about that,' said Henry generously. 'If you want a change, of course you must have it.'

'If you're not going to be here,' said Margaret, 'I want some more of the sun. If you'll tell me when you'll be back, I'll be here again waiting for you.'

'A completely new girl,' said Henry, and kissed her.

*

At the Kurhus next midday, Margaret was given the most beautiful room: large, with a view from the windows extending for miles, charmingly

furnished, and with no fewer than three long rows of assorted books in at least four languages. Margaret, who read books, looked at this small library with considerable curiosity. As far as she could tell, the volumes seemed even to have been chosen with care, and to be by no means mere left-behinds or the bedtime reading one might expect – if one could in an hotel expect anything of that kind at all. But immediately it had occurred to Margaret that these were not books of the sort that most people would read to induce slumber, she observed that the next work on the shelf was a substantial tome named *Die Schlaflosigkeit*, which she suspected might mean 'Insomnia'. She put it back in a hurry. Margaret made a point of sleeping like a top and believed that insomnia was largely a matter of suggestion. She wanted to know nothing about it. The next book was Daudet's *Sappho.* If she had been there to improve her French instead of to have a rest, that might have been well worth struggling with.

After she had said goodbye to Henry, and before leaving Sovastad, Margaret had braved the language barrier in order to buy herself a pair of sober green trousers, dark as the conifers; a coffee-coloured shirt, a lighter green anorak, and a pair of tough shoes. Into this costume she now changed. Probably she was too old for it, at least by British standards; but she intended her standard, for these two days, to be that of the woods and rocks and mountains, rather than that of the neighbours at home. Feeling almost a girl again, she fell on the huge double bed and, splaying out her legs, wrote a joyful postcard to each of her three children at their respective boarding schools. Then, to her intense surprise, she found that in the full flood of the mountain sun she was falling uncontrollably asleep.

When she woke up, she had, to say the least of it, missed luncheon. It was really rather queer. She had slept the night before, as long and as well as she always did, even though in the next bed Henry had probably tossed and turned as usual. She could not remember when last she had fallen asleep in the middle of the day: hardly, she thought, since she had been made to have a daily rest as a child. As far as she could recall, she had not dreamed. It was simply as if two hours or more of her proper life had been stolen from her, arbitrarily cancelled. 'It's the relaxation,' she thought; not quite daring to think, 'It's the relief' ... 'It's the beautiful big bed.' (Henry always insisted on single beds, because he slept so badly; and it was a long time since she

had slept in – or even on – anything else.) 'It's my new clothes' ... 'It's the sun, the mountain air.'

She was not exactly hungry, but felt that if she didn't eat *something* at this accustomed hour, she would regret it. Also she had to buy some stamps. She drew up the zip of her anorak, arranged her shirt collar outside it, put on some lipstick, and descended, feeling strange in every way, but not unpleasantly so. Architecturally, the hotel really was rather fine in its period manner: a wide staircase, with brass wood-nymphs holding up the baluster, wood-nymphs that were half trees; a square hall with tall, thin, Gothic windows, and more wood-nymphs in the stained glass.

From experience of other continental hotels, Margaret had rather expected that someone would enquire solicitously, or pester (according as one saw it), about her lunch – for which she (or Henry) would be, in any case, paying, in accordance with Henry's usual rule. But no one did. In fact, there was no one about at all; not even behind the hotel desk. Nor was there a sound; not even of birds without. The big front door stood wide open and the hall was like a temple into which sunlight streamed through every aperture, strewing the stained-glass nymphs across the white-tiled floor. Margaret reflected that even if she had been set on lunch, she would hardly have got it. At the thought, she felt quite empty.

She imagined that people would be sitting about on the terrace, as she had seen them when she had driven past; but there proved to be no one. She stood by the balustrade, enthralled, though a little oppressed also, by the immensity of sunlit green. The sun was almost directly overhead and really hot. Margaret took off her anorak, and sat down on one of the brightly coloured terrace chairs, uncertain what to do next. She noticed that almost every window in the hotel seemed to be wide open; possibly a consequence of the hotel's sanatorium function. She noticed also that below the terrace on this side, the opposite side from the road (itself a minor one), ran a path. It emerged from the woodland on her right and entered the woodland on her left.

For some reason, it made her think of the track along which the figures pass when a mediaeval cathedral clock strikes the hour. She expected to see a red-eyed dragon emerge from one of the green tunnels, with a jewelled St.

George in pursuit; and disappear into the other tunnel, eternally unconquered, though hourly beset. Or perhaps it might be a procession of twelve wise virgins; or of six pilgrims and six temptations. She herself sat at a higher level, observant of all, like the Madonna. It was along tracks such as the one below that all creation ran from darkness to darkness, everything from the stars to the rabbits in the corner of an altarpiece; until Copernicus, and Kepler and Brahe, and Galileo began upsetting things. One of the hospitable Swedes had shown her a big illustrated book about Brahe, translating all the captions into better English than the English speak. The Swedish family had not appeared to doubt that Brahe and his kind were advantageous.

Out of the forest, as Margaret sat in the hot sun, came not St. George, but a bustling grey-haired woman in a red dress and carrying illustrated papers. Obviously a hotel resident, she ascended the steps to the terrace.

'Good afternoon,' she said to Margaret, staring at her clothes. 'You are a newcomer.' The woman could not have been anything but a lady from England. 'It is unfortunate that I cannot in all honesty wish you a happy stay.' Margaret supposed that she was a trifle eccentric, as the English abroad are so often said to be.

'I'm only here for two nights,' she said smiling.

'Really!' exclaimed the English lady, apparently much surprised. 'A casual. We get very few casuals nowadays. So much the worse, perhaps. But it's connected with changing tastes. There's nothing to do here, you know. Absolutely nothing. What made you come here?'

'I drove past with some Swedish friends and liked the look of it.'

'A pity your Swedish friends didn't tell you that this is not an ordinary hotel. Some of them must have known perfectly well. Most people in Sweden know, and a good many elsewhere too.' She was standing with her hand on the back of the chair on the other side of the table from the chair on which Margaret was seated.

'But my friends did tell me,' said Margaret patiently. 'They warned me it was partly a sanatorium. As a matter of fact, they more or less advised me against coming here. I just didn't think their reasons were very good. As far as I was concerned anyway. I wanted the sun and I wanted not to have to wear my best clothes all the time. That was all. I wanted a rest. For two days, you know.'

'I see,' said the English lady.

'But won't you sit down?'

'Thank you,' said the English lady. 'I had better introduce myself. I am Sandy Slater. At least that is what I have always been called. No one has ever called me Alexandra. *Mrs.* Slater, by the way; though my marriage was little more than a formality. I was born a Brock-Vere.'

'I am Margaret Sawyer. I have usually been called Molly, but I like it less than I did. Mrs., too. My husband is concerned with building the new road.'

'I understand that the new road will make little difference to the Jamblichus Kurhus. The authorities have taken care to keep us at a distance.'

'Is that a good thing? I imagine that the owners mightn't think so. One of my Swedish friends actually said that the Kurhus ought to go in more for attracting motorists.'

'He must have been a very ignorant man,' said Mrs. Slater firmly. 'I notice that many of the Swedes are nowadays. If you will forgive my saying so about a friend of yours.'

'Oh, that's all right,' said Margaret. 'They're friends of my husband's really. Or not even that. More business acquaintances. Not that they haven't been very kind to us. They've been quite fantastic. Though that reminds me,' she continued. 'For some reason I fell asleep almost immediately I arrived here, which is something I never normally do, and in consequence I missed lunch, though it seems a silly thing to say. I'm beginning to feel rather hungry. Is it possible to attract some service?'

'Not until four o'clock,' said Mrs. Slater.

'But it's not yet three!' exclaimed Margaret. 'This is as bad as England. I shall be *paying* for lunch too, or at least my husband will. He *will* book everything, though I should often prefer to be less tied down.'

'Clearly,' said Mrs. Slater in a calm voice, 'you have no idea what this place is. Why do you suppose it is called the *Jamblichus* Kurhus?'

'I didn't know it was until you just mentioned it. It doesn't seem to be put up anywhere. I suppose he was some nineteenth-century German doctor who invented a patent treatment? So many of them seem to have done it.'

'Jamblichus was the one among the seven sleepers who after they had slept for two centuries, went down into the town in order to buy food, tendered the obsolete coins, and found himself arrested. Don't you remember your Gibbon?' enquired Mrs. Slater, even more unexpectedly.

'You mean the *Decline and Fall*? I'm afraid I've never had time for it. I have three children to look after, you know.'

Mrs. Slater gazed at her. 'It's different here,' she said weightily. 'But I knew about Jamblichus before I came here. He's the only one of the seven sleepers whom most people *can* name. Anyway, places like this used often to be called Jamblichus Groves; even by the unsophisticated. This, my dear Mrs. Sawyer (how odd that our husbands' names should be so alike), is an establishment for insomniacs. One can hardly call it an hotel, because hotels are primarily places to sleep in. Still less can one call it a cure, because there is no cure.'

'I noticed a book in my room –' began Margaret, then reflected. 'How terrible! Do you mean that *you* suffer from it?'

'Not as badly as some – including some who are here. I usually get a few hours in the course of a week. Some of the people here haven't slept for years.'

'But that's impossible!' cried Margaret. She recollected herself. 'But you mean that they haven't slept *regularly* for years?'

'I mean that for years they have not slept at all. Not at all. Never.' Mrs. Slater seemed still to be speaking quite calmly.

'But surely,' enquired Margaret timidly, 'surely you can't *live* without *any* sleep?'

'You can,' replied Mrs. Slater. 'In a way. You can live here.'

'What is there special about here, and why do people who have difficulty in sleeping have to live with other people who have difficulty in sleeping? I know very little about it, I'm afraid, because I seem always to have slept rather well, but I should have thought that living all together would be the very worst thing for them.'

'When the trouble passes a certain point – a point far short of never sleeping at all, I assure you – the victim is driven out. Sleepers cannot live for long with an insomniac. It is like living with something supernatural: people who are normal come to feel it as a shadow on their own lives. And they come to feel it quite soon. I speak from knowledge. I told you that my marriage was little more than a formality. I am sure you thought that I was born to be an old maid, as so many Englishwomen are, in spite of all the pretences and defences. Whether I am one of that kind or not, it was my inability to sleep that ended my marriage. Marriage – anyway the usual kind of marriage – is one of the things that insomnia makes impossible. One of the many and important things.'

'I suppose I can imagine that,' said Margaret, 'or begin to imagine. But I still find it unbelievable. I'm glad to say I've always been a good sleeper myself – though, as a matter of fact, always a little afraid of not being – yet I've naturally known people who aren't. It's awful for them, as I quite see, but it doesn't have to be quite as bad as you say. I'm sure it doesn't.'

'That is the usual reaction,' replied Mrs. Slater, still quite calmly. 'At least, the usual first reaction. The answer is that the people you have known aren't real insomniacs at all. They are just people who from time to time have

difficulty in sleeping as much as they would like to, or think they ought to. It may be a matter of personal psychology, or temporary stress, or even digestion. But, in the very great majority of such cases, it is simply a matter of the person not really needing anything like as much sleep as he supposes – or, more usually, wants. People *want* sleep, just as they want love, or want what they call distractions, or even want death. In purely biological terms, most people sleep far more than they need to. Twice as much, or even more.'

Margaret felt that she herself was incriminated by her admissions and by Mrs. Slater's didactic stare.

'The quantity of sleep required to eliminate the poisons from the blood stream is much less than people like to think,' continued Mrs. Slater. She broke off. 'You do *know* that that is the physiological function of sleep?' she asked.

'I think I learnt it at school,' said Margaret, caring less and less for the conversation, feeling more and more aware of a threat, but unable to stop listening, or even asking, however empty her inside.

'As I say, much less sleep is required physiologically than people choose to think. In fact, it is perfectly possible to eliminate the poisons without sleeping at all. Some people, a few people, are built like that.'

Margaret, secure in her steady sleepiness and in all it stood for, had given so little conscious thought to the biology of it that she was in no position to argue.

'That', said Mrs. Slater, 'is the plight of the true insomniac. He is one who has little need for sleep at any time; or none.'

'I suppose there might be certain *advantages*,' said Margaret.

'That is often the second reaction,' said Mrs. Slater. 'There are no advantages; or at least not by the standard of the world outside. The man or woman who in the true sense cannot sleep is a kind of troll, as they call it

here. Life is so made that without sleep only a troll can endure it. The sleepers have no alternative to driving us out.'

'I've heard the word, but I've never quite known what a troll is.'

'Those who are kept out. The unearthly and mysterious, as people say,' replied Mrs. Slater. She seemed to speak with some slight relish.

'Is lack of sleep as disastrous as *that*?'

'Even the most normal people teeter all their lives along a narrow line between good and evil; between impulse and judgement, as we may say. Sleep does two things for the normal person. It gives him constant, long periods of respite from the conflict. It also enables his impulses to find a certain fulfilment in dreams, especially his most lawless impulses. You doubtless have dreams of that kind, Mrs. Sawyer?'

'Sometimes,' said Margaret.

'Think for yourself what life must be like for one who has neither dreams nor tranquillity. Such a life is unendurable, and those condemned to it must become trolls, as I just said.'

Margaret produced a packet of cigarettes from the pocket of her trousers and offered one to Mrs. Slater.

'No thank you,' said Mrs. Slater. 'When we cannot sleep, the narcotics soon cease to have power over us. All of us here have to live with reality for twenty-four hours out of twenty-four... This is not a place for a holiday, Mrs. Sawyer; still less for a rest. None the less, I so much hope you won't go.'

The smoke from Margaret's cigarette rose perpendicularly in the still, warm air. Through it, she had been quietly inspecting the aspect of Mrs. Slater. Margaret could see neither horns nor tip of tail, neither exceptional wrinkles nor even unusually tragic eyes. Mrs. Slater's eyes were not happy eyes, but her total appearance, eyes included, was unreservedly typical of her age,

type, and station. She might have been the Acting Vice-Chairman of a Woman's Institute in East Sussex.

'What is everyone doing now?' Margaret asked.

'They are resting,' said Mrs. Slater. 'At night the insomniac is at his most active. No kind of repose is possible. But much rest is needed when you do not sleep, however hard it is to find. In the afternoon most of us can at least stop moving about. Some persuade themselves that this cessation of movement even amounts to a kind of sleep.'

'What about you?' asked Margaret. 'I'm not keeping you from your rest, am I?'

'No, Mrs. Sawyer. I was restless this afternoon in any case. In so far as the idea of rest has any meaning for people like me, I have been restless all day.' Whatever Mrs. Slater's plight, Margaret was, among other things, beginning to find her continuous self-pity as jarring as her paradoxes were unconvincing. She had noticed before that a person's troubles, the pity the person has for those troubles, and the pity a second person feels for the first person, are all independent from one another. 'Perhaps I have been restless today,' continued Mrs. Slater, 'because I knew that a stranger was coming.'

'I shouldn't think that's very likely,' said Margaret.

'Many of us here acquire such foresight,' said Mrs. Slater. 'It is likely that we should, when you think about it. It's another of the reasons why people dislike and fear us, and drive us out. All the same they're not above sneaking back to us when they're in trouble themselves. They creep back during the night in search of our guidance. I have always thought that the Witch of Endor was one of us.'

While Mrs. Slater had been speaking, an elderly couple had come out of the building and sat down in silence at a table on the other side of the terrace. They were followed almost immediately by another similar couple, who seated themselves at the next table but one to that occupied by Margaret and Mrs. Slater.

Margaret could not help asking a question.

'These couples... Are *both* of them sufferers?'

'Yes,' replied Mrs. Slater; 'but they are not couples in the usual sense.' She spoke in a lowered voice, as if she had been intercepted in the drawing room of a private hotel at Eastbourne. 'They are merely unhappy people who have found another unhappy person. Most of us remain alone. It makes little difference really. Though now, of course, Mrs. Sawyer, I have found *you*.' Mrs. Slater did not smile. Margaret wondered whether it would have been any better if she had smiled.

'Even to a lost soul like me, it still means something to find another English gentlewoman.' Mrs. Slater glanced again at Margaret's somewhat ungentle womanly costume. 'Most of the people here are, naturally, foreigners; people with whom one has merely this one, dreadful thing in common. The only other English at the moment are two very old women, so old that they are both more than a little dotty. As soon as it is four o'clock, you and I must have tea together, Mrs. Sawyer.'

A young man in a black suit and wearing a black tie, had appeared; and then a dark, swarthy woman, who looked like a middle-aged stage gypsy. They had each taken up a table, so that five tables were now occupied, but in the manner of a continental café, there were still many more tables that were empty. Margaret noticed that none of the residents greeted any of the others – or, for that matter, acknowledged her own arrival. They all sat quite silent, and, it seemed to Margaret, almost motionless; though ideas of that sort, she at once reflected, were probably morbidity on her part.

'Thank you very much,' said Margaret to Mrs. Slater. 'If you'll forgive me, I must first go and wash.' She rose and picked up her anorak.

'As you wish,' said Mrs. Slater, in her tiresomely resigned way. 'I shall sit here and wait for you. It will be nice to talk about the London shops, which I shall never see again.'

'Actually, I live near Manchester.' It was doubtless silly to be unkind, but, whatever happened, Margaret did not intend her friendship with Mrs. Slater

to ripen.

Coming down the Kurhus steps was a girl who looked hardly more than a child. She was tiny and slender, with very pale, fair hair, hanging to her shoulders. She wore the simplest possible white cotton dress, without sleeves, and showing almost no figure. Her legs were bare, but white sandals were on her feet. As she descended, her eyes met Margaret's. They were exceedingly blue eyes, but singularly lifeless; more like screens than like pools. Margaret would have expected sleeplessness to manifest most of all in the eyes, but these were the first unusual eyes she had seen in the Kurhus, and it was inconceivable that this very young girl could be among Mrs. Slater's insomniacs; even if all the other people were, about which Margaret felt considerable doubt.

Margaret fancied that self-pity might not be Mrs. Slater's only aberration – or, to say the least, hyperbole; but she knew with certainty that the Kurhus was now spoiled for her, Margaret, and that she wanted to escape from it. She wanted not least to escape from Mrs. Slater personally.

The big hall was quite full of people, who seemed to be converging from all directions, but still without speaking. There were many assorted ages, and various palpable indicia of different nationalities. All the same, it was a perfectly commonplace group; seemingly remarkable only for its silence. The silence, however, chilled Margaret's nerves. Escape she must. The crowd rambled forward to the sunny terrace.

'I've decided to follow your example,' said a voice in Margaret's ear: actually a voice; but, unfortunately, it was the voice of Mrs. Slater. 'I'm going to spruce myself up before we have tea together.'

Margaret could only nod. Mrs. Slater passed her and ascended the staircase between the wood-nymphs that were half trees.

There was now a young Swede behind the hotel desk. It was he who had booked her in and taken away her passport when she arrived. He had fair hair with tight curls, and looked like a boxer or a bison.

Margaret decided not to beat about the bush. She told the hotel clerk that though she had known the Kurhus was partly a sanatorium, she had not realised that so many of the inmates would be patients rather than guests, and that she wanted to go elsewhere. This would surely be understood, though it might not be popular. She thought she would just make off in a taxi; and, if she could devise nothing better, merely return to the hotel in Sovastad.

The first difficulty proved to be that the reception clerk seemed to have very little English, so that he was unable properly to understand her. Margaret had met few Swedes with whom she had been so unable to communicate. But she recognised that her message was unusual and her request arbitrary. So she concentrated on the essential: immediate departure.

'Your passport,' said the clerk. 'It has gone. It will not be back until tomorrow. I told you.'

It was true that he had. It was the kind of thing that often happened in continental hotels, and Margaret, knowing that she was booked in for two days, had not worried about it.

'Where is it?' she asked the clerk.

'Gone. It has gone. I told you.' The clerk stared at her, faintly pugilistic, faintly bovine.

Margaret knew from experience what a hopeless morass this sort of thing could be, even at the best of times; even when it was only that Henry's business compelled the two of them suddenly to go elsewhere.

'I'm not leaving Sweden. I'll come back in a taxi and collect my passport tomorrow. I want to go now just the same. I'm sorry about it, but all these sick people depress me. I quite understand that I shall have to pay. I am prepared to pay for the whole reservation now, if you'll get me a taxi.' She produced a wad of notes from her other trouser pocket. Suddenly her mountain costume, which for a brief time had meant so much to her, had become a middle-aged folly, and a conspicuous one. All the other, rather horrible people were dressed with utter conventionality.

'No taxi,' said the reception clerk, sulky but firm.

'What do you mean?' cried Margaret; less and less dignified, as she all too well knew.

'No taxi after four o'clock,' said the reception clerk.

'Why ever not?' cried Margaret; even while she knew it was not the way to put it if she wanted to get results.

'Not after four o'clock,' repeated the reception clerk.

Margaret began a foolish altercation; feeling all the time like an English innocent abroad in some banal farce. Quite protracted the dispute must have been, as well as foolish; because in the middle of it, Margaret realised, with something not far short of alarm, that Mrs. Slater had reappeared on the staircase in a pink silk tea gown with polka dots; with too much rouge on her cheeks; and with her grey hair so frizzed up that it all stood on end.

'Mrs. Slater, please,' shouted the reception clerk. 'Please explain to this lady –'

But Margaret was saved from final public shame. At this moment, a senior personage appeared from a room behind the desk. He was, like his subordinate, a noticeably muscular-looking man, but his thick black hair was greying, his face was still and worn.

'Forgive me, madam,' he said to Margaret, in more or less perfect English. 'I have been listening, and I have to give you my personal assurance that tonight nothing can be done.'

Mrs. Slater had put her hand on Margaret's left elbow, and was standing expectantly. Margaret would not have hesitated to offend her, had there seemed any real prospect of departure from the Kurhus; but, as things were, she was rather glad that nothing the Manager had said, and that Mrs. Slater could have heard, had been particularised.

'Come on and let's have our tea,' said Mrs. Slater breezily.

Margaret could only turn away from the desk and follow her; quite unwashed.

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Margaret had noticed on other occasions how differently one can feel about a group of people seated around a picturesque hotel terrace after one has come to learn a little more about them; after the hopeful, even happy, expectation one feels at first sight, has been tempered by some degree of real contact.

Emerging down the Kurhus steps, with Mrs. Slater's red hand pressed lightly against her forearm as if to guide her, Margaret recollected that these were the people who had looked so gay when three days before she had sped past in the superlatively hospitable Volvo.

Mrs. Slater guided her back to the same table; which she had 'reserved' by leaving copies of *Vogue* and *The Lady* lying about.

'Please call me Sandy,' said Mrs. Slater.

There *was* something queer about the look of the people sitting on the terrace, though it was nothing obvious. To a passerby, they would still be a perfectly average assembly of respectable citizens. Their oddity lay in their quietness and aloofness. By now, some of them were occasionally exchanging a few words, but the words were palpably functional, connected with the tea, the coffee, the fluffy, flaky cream cakes, or the heat of the afternoon: Margaret felt that they had long ago said absolutely everything they could possibly say. She had a frightening glimpse into how long they had probably had in which to say it. In any case, most of them were solitaries, as Mrs. Slater had remarked: scattered about one at a table, often with head sunk, and in no case making any attempt at communication or affability. An unusual proportion of the whole group was, however, reading, including, in several cases, two at the same table; and reading, almost always, not merely glossy ephemerae, as in Mrs. Slater's case, but heavy, austerely bound volumes with many hundreds of pages. That was only to be expected, Margaret supposed, recollecting the remarkable little library in

her own bedroom. There was more and more evidence that Mrs. Slater had not drawn as long a bow as Margaret had assumed and hoped.

'Please call me Sandy,' said Mrs. Slater a second time.

Margaret supposed she had again been rude in making no specific response.

'If you wish,' she said, trying to sound neither too ungracious nor too gracious. 'So long as you don't call me Molly.'

'Oh but I want to do that,' said Mrs. Slater. The tips of all her red fingers were on the edge of the white, wooden table.

'You may call me Margaret.' It sounded feeble, but the right note was so difficult to strike.

'I have ordered a real English tea for both of us, Margaret. I have one every day. The two old ladies used to do the same, and we all had tea together, summer and winter; but now they don't come down until nightfall. I don't think they eat during the day any more.'

'You make them sound like vampires,' said Margaret. Really Mrs. Slater had to be regulated.

'You are quite right, Margaret,' replied Mrs. Slater seriously. 'I have often thought that the origin of the vampire belief lies in the insomniacs. There is something not quite nice about us, as I have told you.' Mrs. Slater actually giggled. It was a most unusual thing to do on the Kurhus terrace.

A young waiter in a linen jacket arrived with a double English tea on a heavy brass tray; including sandwiches, near-Dundee cake, and even hot scones in a silver calabash, from which the sun glinted and sparkled, like a tiny display of white fireworks.

'Shall I be mother?' enquired Mrs. Slater; already, however, in the act of pouring. The fluid streaming from the long, thin, silver spout, looked very pale. Probably there were not enough tea-bags in the pot.

None of the others was consuming a meal like this, though most of them seemed to be consuming something. Margaret noticed that the small, slim girl in the white dress was merely absorbing a proportionately small tumbler of water. At least, it was presumably water. She lay back at a table by herself, facing the sun; almost staring at it with her blue eyes. She was so very exiguous that her white dress looked as if inside it were merely a few pieces of straw and cardboard; leaving her head, legs, and arms as the only parts that were what they seemed. Two young men were sitting, each by himself, at tables quite near her. One would have expected them to show at least covert interest, but Margaret could see no sign of it. One was eating äggöra and drinking coffee, but both seemed far gone in melancholy.

'That girl,' asked Margaret. 'Surely she is not here because she can't sleep?'

'That girl,' replied Mrs. Slater, 'has never been asleep in her life.'

'I find it awfully hard to believe.'

'In England perhaps. Here they'd know at once what she was.'

Margaret looked up from her second scone.

'What do you mean by that? How would they know what?'

'They'd know she doesn't sleep,' said Mrs. Slater in her calm, conclusive way. 'There are more people like that here than there are in England, and of course the population's much smaller, so everyone gets to know the signs. It's how woods like this began. But won't you take off your jacket again? You must be too hot, I'm sure.'

'No, I'm not too hot.'

'I expect you thought you were coming to some kind of skiing hotel?'

'Not exactly, in the middle of the summer.'

'I should be delighted to lend you a frock. We're much the same size and much the same age, so that the same style should suit us, and all my clothes come from England. We're quite a dressy party here at night.'

'Thank you very much, but I've got several dresses. I've been wearing them ever since I've been in Sweden,' Margaret added, unkindly once more. 'I hoped things up here would be more informal and that I should get two or three days of mountain walking.'

'Not days,' said Mrs. Slater gently. 'It's by night that we walk the mountains here. We don't wear special clothes for it. It's our way of life, so to speak, our destiny. Nothing special about it for us. It's why the wood was put here in the first place.'

'What do you mean by "wood"?' asked Margaret. 'Which wood? There are trees as far as the eye can see, and almost all Sweden seems to be made up of them.'

'Round the Kurhus is a wood,' said Mrs. Slater, 'with paths in it, paths everywhere, paths that have been there for hundreds of years. You saw me following one. It is a Jamblichus wood.'

'I'm sorry to be rude, but I think that name sounds like Alice in Wonderland.'

Mrs. Slater smiled faintly. 'I always thought it was more like Edward Lear,' she said.

'How can you tell, with all these trees, where your particular wood begins and ends?'

Mrs. Slater looked down at the stone flooring of the terrace. 'If I were to suggest that, with all these trees, it perhaps has no beginning or ending – at least in your sense of the words – you wouldn't believe me.' Then Mrs. Slater added softly, and as if interrogating her own heart, 'Would you?'

'It would mean an awful lot of walking, for some of these older people.'

'You are right,' said Mrs. Slater, looking up at Margaret, and again speaking firmly. 'A time comes when people can go no further. In the end, the paths just lose themselves among the trees.'

Really it all *was* like the Alice books; the Alice books and no others. Margaret thought so more and more. It was one thought that helped to keep out other thoughts.

'I've eaten far too much tea.' Curiously enough, she had; despite everything. At least she had if life at the Jamblichus Kurhus (an unconvincing name in almost any language, she would have thought), if life at the Kurhus followed any sort of normal order. 'What time's dinner? I take it that there *is* dinner?'

'We follow the customary scheme of things. Perhaps we value it all the more,' said Mrs. Slater, courageous to the last. 'Dinner is described as from eight, but most of us are very punctual. You are sure you have a frock? I hope you will share my table?'

'I should be delighted,' said Margaret. 'Thank you.'

Margaret wanted both to stretch her legs in the sunshine and mountain air and to examine for herself Mrs. Slater's alleged wood, where she suspected she would find nothing very special. But she did not want Mrs. Slater to come with her. In fact, a further thing she wanted very much, was simply to get away from Mrs. Slater. She thought of escaping by going up to her room as an excuse, and then running off into the forest, but this might be made difficult by the fact that the only public exit from the Kurhus seemed to be that on to the terrace. Moreover, she felt in her bones that she would never evade Mrs. Slater of all people, merely by dodging her round the bushes, as if they had been two schoolgirls. Mrs. Slater would be the first to cry caught any day.

Mrs. Slater insisted on showing Margaret some of the large dress illustrations in *Vogue*, making, on the different garments, comments which were detailed and long-winded, but which struck Margaret as academic, where Mrs. Slater's own needs and circumstances were concerned, and as rather creepy when applied to her own supposed case.

'*You* would look *gorgeous* in *that*,' Mrs. Slater would breathe out earnestly; pointing at something fleecy with her dark red forefinger and pushing the something almost into Margaret's face, while Margaret gazed out at the

slopes of green descending from the terrace and ascending another mountain ridge, ten, twenty, or thirty miles off, it was hard to guess how many.

'If *I* lived *your* life, I'd always wear nice things,' said Mrs. Slater. 'I have excellent taste.'

Margaret had often heard women of sixty or seventy talking for hours in just that way: weighing every detail; speculating, wistfully or cattily, about how this or that garment would suit this or that common acquaintance; at once identifying with and envying Margaret herself, when she happened to be at their disposal for the purpose. The half-dream, half-contest seemed to keep innumerable women not happy, but certainly alive, even through senility. It must serve a purpose, but Margaret did not find it even pathetic. She found it a spun-out makeshift (the very words were significant) which symbolised the worst aspect of being a woman. But everyone lived on makeshifts. Look at Henry, his lumbering toys and his social anxieties!

'What colour do you find suits you best?' asked Mrs. Slater.

'This colour,' said Margaret, pointing to her legs. 'That colour': pointing to the wilderness of leaves.

The others on the terrace had stopped eating and drinking. In any other community, half of them would by now have fallen asleep.

'Forgive me, please,' said Margaret. 'I should like to wander about a little before dinner.' She rose. No one seemed to take any notice; even to glance at her.

'I'll show you round,' said Mrs. Slater, scrambling together her papers. 'There are things that need to be explained.'

'It's very kind of you, but I'll take my chance.' Margaret had a bright idea. 'Like a famous Swede, I want to be alone.'

'Mrs. Slater was not to be silenced conclusively, 'Just as you like,' she said, 'but remember: it is not like going for a stroll in England.'

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The differences, Margaret at first thought, were that here there were no litter, no structures, no advertisements, no noise of cars and aeroplanes and radios, and, above all, no people. Man had presumably planted these trees and tramped out these paths, but he had done nothing else. It was, indeed, very unlike a wood in Cheshire.

When Margaret had descended from the terrace, she had by instinct avoided the green tunnel from which Mrs. Slater had originally emerged, and, crossing below the terrace, had entered the other one, which for a few yards ran beneath the wall of the Kurhus itself. Margaret could hear the swill and clatter of the kitchen; and as well as these things, the chatter of the staff, which harmonised with them. After the silent terrace, the cheerful sound came as a relief. But it was audible for only a minute or two; nor was the Kurhus building visible for longer than that through the forest.

And almost immediately, the fat, beaten path reached a nodule whence it unwound into a dozen or more rabbit runs among the trees. It was as if at this point the withdrawal of man had left small animals to continue his work. The paths, though very narrow, seemed definite, but it was impossible to know which to choose. All were compelled to wind continuously, as they pressed forward through the irregularly planted trees. Already, after only a few hundred yards from the terrace, there was a real danger of being lost. It struck Margaret as an ideal area for going round and round in a hopeless circle, as the lost are well known to do, owing (she had heard) to almost everybody having one leg shorter than the other. It was not at all the sort of situation she had contemplated as having perhaps lain behind Mrs. Slater's rejected offer of guidance. She had visualised something far more fanciful.

She selected a path almost at random, and began to weave about among the trees. The path, however narrow, was unobstructed: there was no question of pressing through bushes, or pushing aside branches. Even the surface was comparatively smooth. It was almost as if the vegetation had been cut back, but Margaret saw that there was no sign of this. It seemed rather as if it had never grown across the path; just as weeds never take root in water that is constantly traversed by boats. Margaret perceived at once what this

implied: the little paths must be in continuous use, as Mrs. Slater had said. It was a further confirmation of Mrs. Slater's entire improbable thesis about the insomniacs.

Margaret stopped. There was a steady, rustling, pulsation in the thick undergrowth between the trees; and a whirring and flapping among the leaves overhead that would rise and fall suddenly, like a very irregular line on a graph. To judge by the sounds, there might have been condors among the branches and anacondas among the bushes. Margaret, in fact, was unsure what might not really be there: were there not still wolves and bears in Sweden, and, probably, many more varieties of reptile than in Britain? The brush was here as high as her elbows and dense enough to conceal anything short of an elephant. It was a second situation that she had not thought of when dismissing Mrs. Slater's offer.

She walked on. The narrow shafts of sun struck down like spotlights in a theatre, she being the principal actress; the wider cataracts descended like a benediction in an Italian painting, she being the saint. But in many places the trees were so thick that the sunlight penetrated only as a flickering radiance, suggesting a different and brighter world above. After a time, and quite suddenly, the underbrush almost ceased and the little tracks traversed dunes of pine needles.

Tracks, not track. Even through the underbrush had run several transverse tracks. Out here, many intersecting paths could be seen simultaneously, which was reassuring, because, at the worst, and if one knew one's direction, one could cross the open ground, but disconcerting too, as suggesting that the entire forest was a maze.

Margaret was in many ways enjoying herself, but she realised that she would have to go back. She regretted that she had so little equipment for pathfinding. She had been feeling regrets of that kind almost since she had first arrived in Sweden. But it was so difficult to know what one could do. All the possibilities seemed ridiculous. Her mother had not let her even be a Girl Guide.

Margaret felt, in any case, that woodland techniques, though important in themselves, were very secondary to something else... She had words for it,

she had long had them, though they were negative words: what was needed was the rejection of so many of the things that her husband, Henry, appeared to stand for. The thought had roamed about her brain and body for years, like a germ in the blood, always poisoning her content. In this Swedish forest, a far and lonely place by comparison with most other places she had known, the unrest flared up and momentarily put her off balance. She attempted to make her usual answer to herself: tried to enter into Henry's point of view, to make proper allowance for the fact that he was far from a free agent. He was hardly more a free agent than the people were at the Kurhus, according to Mrs. Slater's tales, and according to the evidence of these teeming little rabbit-runs through the woods. All the same, she felt that it was up to a man to be more of a free agent than Henry was. It was not that she herself especially wanted to blaze trees and utter bird-calls. It was rather that the forest symbolised something that was outside life – certainly outside Henry's life and her own. And not part of Henry's inner life either, though it apparently was part of hers, if one could judge by what she felt now.

Margaret took a small pull on herself. Henry must be broadly right and she broadly wrong, or life would simply not continue as it did, and more and more the same everywhere. The common rejoinder to these feelings of rebellion was, as she knew well, that she needed a little more scope for living her own life, even (as a few Mancunians might dare to say) for self-expression. But that popular anodyne never, according to Margaret's observation of other couples, appeared in practice to work. Nor could she wonder. It reduced the self in one to the status and limits of a hobby. It offered one lampshade making, or so many hours a week helping the cripples and old folk, when what one truly needed was a revelation; was simultaneous self-expression and self-loss. And at the same time it corrupted marriage and cheapened the family. The rustling, sunny forest, empty but labyrinthine, hinted at some other answer; an answer beyond logic, beyond words, above all beyond connection with what Margaret and her Cheshire neighbours had come to regard as normal life. It was an answer different in kind. It was the very antithesis of a hobby, but not necessarily the antithesis of what marriage should be, though never was.

Margaret could again hear the sounds of the Kurhus kitchen. A girl there was singing. Margaret stopped and listened for a moment; which, as she reflected, she would probably not have done had she been able to understand the words. The song had some pure existence and beauty, which understanding of the words, while possibly bringing something else, would have destroyed. Listening to the talk in the intervals at Hallé concerts, Margaret had suspected that too much understanding of musical theory can be similarly destructive. And so often people said to her that when they travelled abroad they wanted really to meet and know the local population; in the same sort of way, as far as possible, as they met and knew their fellow English. They spent hard evenings learning languages for the purpose – or in the hope. Margaret realised that this was not her idea at all. The song of this girl was precisely akin to the song of the forest: if one worked at it, one would cease to hear it. In fact, now that Margaret came to think, she realised that she had been unconsciously disengaging the song from the loud clanging of pans in which, properly speaking, it was submerged. She had been hearing only the song, and nothing of the mechanism that, objectively, almost overwhelmed it; and assuredly put it in its place. So it had been in the forest. One had to lose the noise of the mechanism, not least the ever-deafening inner echoes of it. One had to dispel practicality. Then something else could be heard – if one was lucky, if the sun was shining, if the paths were well made, if one wore the right garments: and if one made no attempt at definition or popularisation.

Margaret perceived with surprise two practicalities: she had been walking for an hour and a half, far longer than she had supposed; and from the clear ground where the rabbit-runs were all visible at once, she had returned without giving a thought to her route. Blazing trees could not be the only ciphering. Losing one's way was largely an act of intention.

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All the same, Margaret had virtually to scamper into her dress with the velocity of a child. Not only was the terrace deserted, but there was the beginning of a crowd in the hall, as she hastened through. They were arrayed in half-festivity; the counterpart of half-mourning. As usual, Mrs. Slater had spoken aright. What was more, Margaret observed that her huge

bed had not been 'turned down'. It was the first hotel of that standing where she had encountered such an omission.

Margaret stood for a moment naked in the evening sunlight, finding her silhouette more pleasing than she had found it for some time; then scrambled into a stone-coloured garment in hard silk, the best she could do for Mrs. Slater, whom there could be no hope of eliminating.

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'Look,' said Mrs. Slater. 'There are the other two Englishwomen.'

Few could have told to what nation they belonged. They resembled two very ancient, long-neglected, near-to-death bushes; which now put out each year only a few half-hearted leaves in the entire mass. One felt that at any moment, a branch might quietly drop off, or the entire bole split and subside.

'Mrs. Total and Mrs. Ascot,' expounded Mrs. Slater. 'I used to be able to play games with them, but no more. I do wish you were here for longer, Margaret. You can imagine how alone I am.'

'Is there really nowhere else you could go?'

'The other places are even worse.'

There was more conversation at dinner, in a variety of tongues; and more at the end than at the beginning. Undeniably it was as if they were all working up to something, even though they did it in a careful and hypochondriac way. None the less, those who had sat alone on the terrace, sat alone in the dining room also. It was merely that some of them spoke from time to time across a void, and that certain of the couples appeared more in touch. Also there were more people in the dining room than Margaret had until then seen in the Kurhus. Certainly the better spirits could not be attributed to liquor, because there was none. Margaret was accustomed to hotels where before one dined, one had several drinks at the bar, sometimes in advance of one's husband. Occasionally one met people there. Infrequently, they were quite interesting. She realised that here there was seldom anyone new to

meet. She was surprised that no one other than Mrs. Slater seemed concerned to meet *her.* Possibly it was the language difficulty.

'Drink is absolutely forbidden?' She feared that again she was tending merely to bait poor Mrs. Slater.

'Nothing is *forbidden*,' replied Mrs. Slater, in a very English way. 'If we don't smoke or drink, it's because we've all learnt better. When you can't sleep, the consequences of drinking are indescribable. You do know that the physiological function of alcohol if soporific? For us, it would be like an impotent man taking an aphrodisiac.'

Margaret especially disliked Mrs. Slater's occasional shafts of modern frankness. Besides she had always understood that it was exactly what impotent men did do.

'Of course it's entirely different for you,' said Mrs. Slater. 'I am sure that if you were to stay longer, something could be arranged with the doctors. I myself shouldn't mind your drinking all you wanted.'

'Doctors!' said Margaret. 'I hadn't realised that there were doctors.'

'Oh yes. Though of course they're no use to us. There's no cure for *our* condition.'

'Then why are they here?'

'Old people, like Mrs. Total and Mrs. Ascot, can't settle down unless there are doctors about. And I am sure it applies to foreigners too. Don't you think it applies to most people today, whatever their age? They must all have doctors, be the cost what it may.'

'I suppose I should have expected doctors,' said Margaret. 'Where are they now? Have we seen one?'

'The surgery is on the very top floor The *kirurgi*, as it's called in Swedish. There are two doctors on duty at all times, night and day, in case there's a crisis. You will help yourself to rödkål from the bowl?'

They were seated by a window, outside which summer night was falling.

'What sort of crisis is commonest?'

'I'm afraid our most frequent crises are sudden mania and sudden death. For this reason, the doctors have to be fairly young and strong. The same applies to the male staff in general, as you may have noticed. With insomnia, there is often a quick snap. The strain can be borne no longer. That is still another of the reasons why we have always been made to live apart. The provincial mental hospital finds many of its recruits here, but few of its so-called cures. You'd hardly believe it, but even *there* people like us don't sleep. And as for our dead, there is a special place for *them* in the wood: not easy to find unless you know where to look. Even after death, it's the same old story of exclusion. But I fear that all this is hardly the way to make you extend your visit. I know only too well that instead of arousing love and pity, as one might hope, the facts do just the opposite. We poor folk are doomed to eternal self-sufficiency, whether we like it or not. So eat up your mört, Margaret, and take no notice of all these gloomy thoughts.'

Margaret decided that, in fact, she did not feel as gloomy as she should have done. Mrs. Slater still wallowed too much; and Margaret's main feeling about the Kurhus as a whole was acute and ever-growing curiosity, reprehensible though that might be. She felt mildly stimulated by a community so entirely novel and unpredictable, however unconvivial. Besides, her experience in what Mrs. Slater called 'the wood', had perceptibly shifted the four points of her inner compass. Life's terms of reference had changed... Conceivably, she reflected, as Mrs. Slater helped her to a crumbling wodge of efterrättstarta, the unaccustomed liberty and isolation would have gone a little to her head, wherever she had found herself; but the real wonder lay in taking only one short step and lighting upon an entire world so different. These people round her might, in a sense, be outcasts, as Mrs. Slater said. Quite possibly, they suffered; looking at them, it was hard to be sure. What Margaret did know was that the Kurhus had already recharged the battery of her life, rewound the spring. After long inertia, she was again, mysteriously, on the move.

'Cream?' enquired Mrs. Slater, holding high a silver boat. 'Or as the Swedes call it, *grädde*?'

On the move once more, and so soon after starting, Margaret could not be expected to think about how to stop.

'Why do you smile?' asked Mrs. Slater.

'I'm so sorry,' said Margaret. 'It must have been something in my own thoughts.'

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'No, there's no coffee,' said Mrs. Slater. 'As everybody knows, the physiological consequence of coffee is wakefulness. But in your case it may this time be just as well that there is none. Because if I were you, I should go straight to bed.'

'But I don't feel in the least like sleep.' Margaret spoke without thinking. At the Kurhus, even new clichés were needed. 'Oh, I've said the wrong thing. I do apologise.'

Mrs. Slater gazed back with fishy eyes.

'Even if you don't sleep, stay in your room.'

'Why?'

'At night we walk. After dinner, we begin; and many of us walk till dawn. It is not a thing for you to see.'

'Mrs. Slater,' began Margaret.

'Sandy, if you don't mind.'

'Sandy, of course,' Again Margaret smiled. 'Sandy, if what you say is true, I'm very sorry for you all, but you can't suppose that I could come here, and listen to what you've told me, and not want to see for myself? It may be wrong of me, but I just can't help it.'

'I suppose it's natural,' said Mrs. Slater, 'and I've known it often. With the world what it is today, I imagine we're lucky that people aren't brought in

buses to stare at us, like they used to stare at the lunatics in Bedlam. I expect it will come to that in the end, though they won't get the local people to drive the buses for them. We're unlucky, and on the unlucky is a curse. I warn you, Margaret. The local people know and are right.'

Margaret looked down at the gay table mats.

'Since you're warning me, please tell me exactly what you're warning me of. What could happen to me?'

But Mrs. Slater was entirely unspecific. 'Nothing good,' was all she said. 'Nothing that you would wish. I am speaking to you as a friend.'

It was very unconvincing. Margaret even wondered whether she was not being merely warned against making undesirable acquaintances. It was difficult to decide what to do.

The dining room was rapidly emptying. All seemed to be quiet once more. The diners were leaving in silence; almost stealthily, Margaret thought. It was nearly dark, but the air was still faintly crimson from reflections of the sunset.

'Tell me,' said Margaret, 'what happens in winter, when the snow is on the mountains? They talk a lot about that in Sovastad.'

'We suffer the more,' replied Mrs. Slater. 'We sit all night and wait for the spring. What else could we do?'

'All right,' said Margaret. 'I'll stay in my room. And tomorrow I think I'd better go somewhere else.'

'Please don't go before you have to,' pleaded Mrs. Slater. 'You'll be all right. You'll sleep since you've had no coffee. There is nothing to keep you awake. You'll have an excellent night.'

The big hall was lit, though only rather faintly, by pretty lamps, in which the brass nymphs on both sides of the staircase gleamed and flickered. A well-built elderly man whom Margaret had noticed dining by himself stood

in a far corner, apparently musing. There was no one else to be seen. Mrs. Slater once more put her hand on Margaret's arm.

'I'll see you to the door of your room,' said Mrs. Slater.

'No,' said Margaret. 'Let's part here.'

Mrs. Slater paused.

'You won't forget your promise?'

'It wasn't a promise,' said Margaret. 'But I'll not forget.'

Mrs. Slater withdrew her hand, then held it out as if to bind Margaret in a pledge. But all she said was, 'Then, good night.' Bravely she added, 'Sleep well.'

'See you in the morning,' said Margaret, wondering if she would, and if these were appropriate words. Was it possible that at this moment Mrs. Slater was preparing to 'walk'?

A middle-aged woman, perhaps eight or ten years older than Margaret, but still noticeably beautiful, descended the staircase in a costly-looking fur coat, although the evening was very warm, tap-tapped across the white, tiled floor, and went out into the darkness.

Mrs. Slater went up the staircase without once looking back at Margaret. She disappeared down a corridor which was not Margaret's corridor.

Margaret had intended herself to go up almost immediately, having delayed for a moment only from anxiety to avoid a bedroom colloquy with Mrs. Slater; but on the instant she was alone, the elderly man in the corner of the hall advanced towards her and said, 'Forgive me, but I was bound to overhear what Mrs. Slater, a dear friend of us all, was saying to you. There is little conversation here, and most that is said, is heard not by one alone. You would be mistaken altogether to accept Mrs. Slater's sad view of our curious community. There is, I assure you, a different side to us. We are not

sad all the time. You felt that yourself when you walked this evening in our wood.'

'Did you see me there?' asked Margaret. 'What you say is quite true.'

'Just as most of the things that are said to one are heard by many, so most of the things that each of us does are known to all.' 'Would you do me the honour of taking a cup of coffee with me?'

An elderly pair came down the stairs and went silently forth.

'Mrs. Slater said there was no coffee. She also advised me against going out.'

'Mrs. Slater, as you say in English, exaggerated, so let us then have coffee. You will see.'

He pressed a bell on the reception desk. One of the white-jacketed waiters appeared. The elderly man gave the order in the most usual way.

A man of about forty, who had not changed from his light suit for dinner, walked straight from the dining room, across the hall, to the steps down to the terrace.

'Let me introduce myself. I am Colonel Adamski. You, I know, are Mrs. Sawyer.'

For a member of a community that seemed so silent and so uninterested, it was amazing how much he knew.

They shook hands.

'The point that Mrs. Slater overlooks is that only by great sacrifice can we poor human beings reach great truth.'

Margaret sat up straight. 'Yes,' she said. 'I understand. I really do.' She was astonished with herself.

'Of course you do,' said Colonel Adamski. 'The Italian man of the world, Casanova – if you'll forgive my mentioning such a scamp – remarks on the basis of unusually wide knowledge of the world that, in his observation, only one human being in a hundred, or some such proportion, ever experiences the jolt that sets the faculty for truth in motion. Casanova's faculty was set in motion by freemasonry – though that is something else that, as a good Catholic, I should not bring into the conversation, least of all with a charming lady. Nor is a jolt – a shock, a blow, a fatality – always necessary. I doubt whether you regard yourself as having suffered a jolt?'

'I think that what Mrs. Slater had to say might have been a jolt,' said Margaret. 'This afternoon, I mean.'

'You are right to name the time,' said Colonel Adamski, lightly pouncing. 'Already you understand much: so much more than you know. For the reason why Mrs. Slater is so sad and so uncomprehending is that she walks in the afternoon instead of at night.'

'Does she not walk at night as well?'

'Seldom.' The Colonel broke off. 'But here is our coffee. Will you please pour? Alas, my hand is not steady.'

'I'm so sorry.'

'It was that terrible war we fought, where the powers of darkness were almost equally strong on both sides. Not a righteous war, not a necessary war, not a war in which victory was for one moment possible. You can see at once, I would suppose, that I take an unusual view for a Polish officer. It was towards the end of that war that I stopped sleeping – stopped entirely; and it has been here that I have seen the truth of things. Great sacrifice: great truth. It is something that Mrs. Slater, who walks in the afternoon as if she were on holiday at Royal Leamington Spa or Royal Tunbridge Wells, does not understand.'

'Colonel Adamski,' said Margaret. 'I have to ask you whether you take milk?'

'No milk. It is black coffee, pure but strong, that fortifies against the powers of darkness with which the world is filled.'

All the time, people were passing through the hall in ones and twos, more commonly the former; and the night, now utterly black when viewed from the lamplight, was swallowing them. Warm though it had been, and in the Kurhus still was, Margaret was becoming aware of a little icy gust every time the door opened.

'A long war,' said Colonel Adamski. 'Those so-called concentration camps, of which we hear so much. A bad illness. A heartbreak that is without hope. The suffering that grows with religion. These are among the things that set the faculty for truth in motion. Or sleeplessness. Shakespeare complains often of not sleeping, but see how much he owes to it! Even the absurd local poet, Strindberg, would be still more grotesque if shafts of truth had not occasionally struck home as he lay wakeful; at one time in this very place. It would have been better by far if he had never left it. Then think of your own great statesman, Lord Rosebery: recognised by all as a man marked out, a man in a different mould from the pygmies who swarmed around his feet; though few of those who knew this could say why. Some of them even wrote books to explain how unable they were to account for Lord Rosebery's obvious greatness. Did you know, Mrs. Sawyer, that for many years Lord Rosebery hardly slept at all?'

'I'm afraid he was rather before my time,' said Margaret.

'He would have understood well that we who live here are at once cursed as Mrs. Slater says, but chosen also. He had the blue eyes that are commonest among our kind.'

'It seems to me that most of you *look* very much like the rest of the world.'

'We have the commonplace aspect of monks. Remove the distinguishing clothing, and many monks resemble Mrs. Slater. If you will pardon the paradox.'

The hall was now quite quiet.

'May I give you some more coffee, Colonel Adamski?'

'If you please.'

She refilled both cups, and then sat thinking.

'Are there boundaries?' she asked, after a while. 'Or frontiers? To me it seemed that the wood, this special wood that you all speak of, was just part of the whole Swedish forest.'

'That is true,' said the Colonel. 'Every now and then one of us fails to return. Some find tracks into the further forest, and return never.'

'Perhaps they have merely decided to leave the Kurhus, and find that the simplest way of doing it? I can imagine that. I wanted to leave this afternoon, but it seemed almost impossible... I am glad now that I stayed,' she added, smiling, and unwrapping a lump of sugar from its paper.

The Colonel bowed gravely. 'They go,' he said, 'because they have reached their limit. For men and women there is to everything a limit, beyond which further striving, further thought, leads only to regression. And this is true even though most men and women never set out at all; possibly are not capable of setting out. For those who do set out, the limit varies from individual to individual, and cannot be foreseen. Few ever reach it. Those who do reach it are, I suspect, those who go off into the further forest.'

Margaret's eyes were shining. 'I know that you are right,' she cried. 'It is something I have long known, without finding the words.'

'We all know it,' said the Colonel. 'And we all fear it. Because beyond our limit is nothing. It is a little like the Italian parable of the onion: skin after skin comes away, until in the end there is nothing – nothing but a perfume that lingers a little, as the dead linger here a little after death, perfuming the air, and then are gone. Or, more grandly, it is like Nirvana, no doubt; though Nirvana is something no European can understand. For me, it is like a particular moment in the war; a moment when, having no weapons, I had to fight hand to hand. It was not a moment I care to recall, even when I walk in the wood. It is far from true, Mrs. Sawyer, that we soldiers are men of

strength and blood. New soldiers are like that in the least. But it was for me the moment when I stopped sleeping, stopped dreaming. Dreams, Mrs. Sawyer, are misleading, because they make life seem real. When it loses the support of dreams, life dissolves. But perhaps we have spoken enough of this funny little group to which I have found my way? Even I who am one of them do not deceive myself that it is the whole world, and you are only a visitor among us, here today and gone tomorrow, as your idiom puts it?'

'I shall be sorry to be gone,' said Margaret matter-of-factly. She tilted the coffee pot, then lifted the lid. 'I'm afraid there's no more. In England the coffee's bad, but there's more of it. I expect that's symbolical too.'

The Colonel laughed politely.

'Should I enter the wood, Colonel Adamski? Now, I mean, when all of you are walking? Mrs. Slater forbade me most strictly. What do you advise?'

'You will have realised by now that on many questions there is no one view amongst us. No more than in the rest of the world. No more than in a monastery, to return to that example. You might be surprised! I went to school with monks, and can assure you that they differ among themselves every bit as much as politicians or businessmen. Mrs. Slater's view reflects Mrs. Slater. When I was stationed for years in Britain with the Polish forces, waiting and learning, but mainly waiting, I learned that Britain's strength lay in women like Mrs. Slater, cautious and unimpassioned. It would be wrong for me to argue with so excellent an example of your fellow-countrywomen.'

'But should I enter the wood, Colonel Adamski?'

'Why ever not, Mrs. Sawyer, if you want to? Why ever not? Few of us night-walkers actually bite. And certainly we should never bite a lovely lady like you.'

He moved in his chair.

'Oh,' said Margaret, remembering. 'I do hope I haven't been keeping you?'

'But most agreeably.' The Colonel rose and faintly clicked his heels. 'Your husband is a fortunate man. I could only wish he didn't build roads.'

'Why?' asked Margaret.

The Colonel spread out his hands.

'The blood. The noise. The aggression and hostility. The devastation and emptiness. The means with no ends. The first roads, the first roads like that, were built by Hitler. The place of war is now taken in society by motoring. I, a soldier, tell you that my trade has changed its shape. But these are not things I should disclose to a road-builder's wife, who has done me the honour of taking coffee with me after dinner. I apologise, Mrs. Sawyer. I go.' The Colonel again made the faintest possible click with his heels, and went off up the stairs, stepping very silently for so well-built a man.

It seemed likely that all who meant to go out had now gone; possibly the entire guest-list, with the exceptions of Mrs. Total and Mrs. Ascot, Mrs. Slater and Margaret herself. Margaret sat on in the silent hall with its scattered fairy lights, hardly in sum providing even illumination by which one wishing to could read. In the end, a single late-departer descended the staircase. It was the small, slim girl, who earlier had worn a white dress. Now she wore a dark garment (there was not enough light for Margaret to discern the exact colour); which fitted as a skin and as tightly as a young one. She tripped down the stairs, swiftly but not hurriedly; not only as if to be last was her proper place, but perhaps even as if aware that she was expected and awaited. She looked skinnier and frailer than ever: her legs attentuated rather than slender, her breasts almost invisible in the darkness of the fabric that covered them. As she walked past, she glanced at Margaret directly, for the first time: her big blue eyes seemed to flash for a half-second, as light caught them; and to Margaret it seemed that her tiny, almost wasted mouth smiled slightly though whether in recognition it was impossible to say. In any case, she was past in a moment, and, in another, out through the door on to the terrace, where the blackness covered and absorbed her instantly.

Margaret found that, without volition, she had risen to her feet and was staring out towards the night beyond the glass panels in the door. She

walked down the hall and followed the girl on to the terrace.

It was quite unexpectedly cold: she had forgotten the contrast in temperature between the Swedish daylight and the Swedish darkness. Later in the year, as she understood, there would be no darkness at any time during the twenty-four hours, but now it was thick and moonless and starless, thick and icy. Shaking all over in her dinner dress (though she could recall that many of the other guests had not looked particularly wrapped up when they went forth) and with her teeth already chattering so badly that her head felt like a skull, Margaret none the less groped her way slowly along the dark terrace, trying to dodge round the almost invisible tables and chairs, and guiding herself by the dim, pale line of the stone balustrade to her left. In the end, she reached the few steps down to the transverse path along which Mrs. Slater had so long before emerged; descending them with stress in her high-heeled shoes; and tottered off towards the wood she had entered that afternoon, the wood about which opinions seemed to differ so much, the wood where her own view of things had shifted perceptibly, as she knew quite well, and even though she had but dropped in as a foreign tripper, and but for a period of time to be counted more rationally in minutes than in hours, days, or years.

She went forward among the trees for perhaps fifty yards, then stopped. She had not even reached the nodule where the wider path untwined into the little rabbit-runs. She realised that if she went further, she would lose even the edgeless oval of something less than darkness behind her. Now there was no sound from the Kurhus kitchen, nor a light, visible through the foliage, in any part of the structure. It struck Margaret that the staff might go away each night to sleep. For the staff – the staff, of course, *slept*; and might well find the indulgence easier when uncontrasted with universal wakefulness. To Margaret, the cold was the strangest thing. In only a few minutes her body had become so cold that she no longer even suffered from the chill. It felt like a body packed in a single block of ice; serene, and no longer any responsibility of hers. She wondered whether if one really were packed in a block of ice, one still spent a third of one's life with one's eyes closed, sleeping.

She had ceased to shiver or to chatter. She stood still and, there being nothing at all to see, listened. The steady, slight rustling of the afternoon was still to be heard. It could then have been the small creatures of the day. Margaret supposed it could not be the small creatures of the night; even more numerous, she understood. Still it seemed unlikely that small creatures would continue the same noise – and the same *degree* of noise (so that only when one stopped making an unnecessary noise oneself could one hear it) – in light and in darkness. Then Margaret realised that this might be a wood in which *nothing* slept; perhaps not even the trees.

The soft rustling went on and on. Occasionally a black bird swooped down invisibly. Outside and beyond the clear ice that enfolded her, Margaret suddenly began to be afraid lest in the darkness one of the perambulant Kurhus guests brush past her. She doubted whether she could face such an occurrence.

Probably it was this comparatively trifling fear which tipped the scale. Probably everything in the world is decided by tiny last straws. Though she had no doubt that, for a little time to come, she would despise herself, Margaret resolved upon retreat, upon leaving it at that: she would return to the Kurhus at once; go to her room; rub the ice out of herself with the huge Swedish bath towel, have a hot bath, turn on the heater, if there was one; snuggle down, as the women's papers put it, in bed; aim to sleep, even pray to sleep, if she had to, though not once in her life hitherto had she found sleep to involve anything of the kind. And tomorrow, as would then be logical and necessary, she would return, having made herself as invisible as possible during the short remaining time at the Kurhus, to Sovastad, a day of her holiday lost, to say nothing of a day of Henry's money. Perhaps, she thought, she had reached her limit; considerably sooner than for a brief period that evening she had supposed, even taken for granted about herself.

As she picked her way out of the dark wood, she realised that she had begun to shiver again. Crossing the silent hall, she wondered whether it would all end merely in a bad cold. It would be an appropriate sequel to her surrender. She despised herself for not changing her clothes and returning to the wood. She had not even confirmed that the people who had gone out through the Kurhus hall were in the wood at all. She was only sure that

even in her thickest clothes she would find the wood almost as icy as if she were wearing nothing.

She rubbed herself down. She sank into steaming water. She went to bed. She felt self-betrayed, that she had behaved as an average woman would do; she had reached a point where she could be told little more and beyond which, if she went on, she would have to go alone, frozen and undefended; but she soon slept, and with no special measures.

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When she woke to the morning sun (as high as this on the mountains the sun could shine at any hour), she knew that she would have to go at once. If a taxi could not be got, she would make her way on foot down the mountain to Sovastad, leaving her small luggage for Henry to go after when he returned. At one point she would not have wished that Henry should visit the Kurhus, but now it did not matter. She put on the dress in which she had arrived.

There was no demur. The hall was empty of guests, as it so often was, but the young Swede who looked like a boxer, was behind his desk, produced Margaret's passport, and said he would ring up for a taxi at once. He did enquire whether Margaret wanted breakfast, but seemed unsurprised when she declined. Margaret wanted to meet neither Mrs. Slater nor Colonel Adamski, and did not know which, in their very different ways, she wanted to meet the less. Perhaps she wanted least of all to meet the frail-looking girl with bright blue eyes; whose resistance to cold, even in thin black tights, seemed to be so much greater than her own. The young reception clerk did not offer to abate half of Henry's liability; or seem to think that the matter called for reference.

Surprisingly soon, the taxi arrived and Margaret directed it back to the familiar hotel in Sovastad. She hoped that she would not find it full. Her present reservation began, of course, only on the night of the next day, when Henry would be back. Looking out of the taxi's rear window, she saw the white tables scattered about the deserted terrace, the bright flowers in hanging baskets, the vast sweep of green descending the side of the mountain, of which the lower part had not yet caught the morning sun.

Presumably the regular inmates of the Kurhus were, in their own way, resting after the night's peregrinations. There was still so much that Margaret did not understand.

The hotel in Sovastad said it was already fully booked that night, and was none too polite about it either. Had it not been that she and Henry had just stayed in the establishment for a week, and had this not been emancipated Sweden, Margaret might have thought from the demeanour of the reception staff that a foreign woman travelling alone was not welcome as a guest. All three of them glowered at her, as if she were a complete stranger and an undesirable one. Moreover, the taxi-driver had brought her case into the hotel and was shifting about apparently almost as eager to be rid of her as were the hotel people.

'Can you recommend me somewhere else?'

'The Central.'

'You realise that I shall be returning here tomorrow?'

They simply stared back at her and said nothing. She imagined that they had not enough English to understand her.

The taxi-driver, with extreme grumpiness, took her to the Central.

The Central was apparently so fully booked that the elderly woman behind the desk did not even need to consult her record. In fact, she did not speak at all. She merely shook her head, on which the smooth grey hair surmounted the familiar Swedish bone structure. However, she shook it with great decisiveness.

'Can you recommend me somewhere else?'

This time Margaret seemed more or less to be understood.

'Krohn's.'

Sovastad was only a small town, despite its skilful graft of Scandanavian urbanity, and Margaret appreciated that as the quest continued, standards

were bound to sink. Krohn's was a pension, basically, perhaps, for commercial travellers. None the less, it was clean, bright, and attractive.

It was also full up. This time the reception was in charge of a small boy, with a tousle of wild blond hair larger than his face, and curious, angular eyes. He wore an open white shirt, and a scarlet scarf round his neck. He could speak no English at all, so that it was useless even asking for a suggestion of somewhere else. Foreign visitors were unusual at Krohn's.

The boy stood behind a table (Krohn's did not rise to a formal reception desk) holding tight to the edge of it, and visibly wishing Margaret out of the place and far away. One might have thought he was quite frightened of her, and Margaret supposed it was only reasonable seeing that he was perhaps but ten or eleven, and with not a word he could share with her.

'Where now?' she asked the taxi-driver.

It was still only half past ten, but the situation was becoming disturbing. Margaret wondered if the taxi-man would by this time suggest that she return for the night to the Kurhus. She began to wish that she was not alone in Sovastad. She supposed that she could have recourse to Henry's Swedish friends, but it was the last thing she wanted (short of returning to Kurhus) and the last moment at which she would have wanted it. She would have such particularly difficult things to explain, and she was bound to be questioned with solicitous closeness, and probably reported back to Henry in the same spirit.

'Frälsningsarmén,' he said.

'What's that?'

'Frälsningsarmén,' he said again. 'It's all you'll get.'

This last could hardly be true, Margaret thought. Sovastad was not a large town, but she herself, during the previous week, had seen more than three places at which it seemed possible to stay. Possibly the taxi-driver knew that all were full. Possibly there was some big event in the town which had

booked all the beds. She decided at least to have a look at the place the taxi-driver had suggested.

It proved to be a hostel of the Salvation Army.

'No, really,' said Margaret; but she was too late.

A woman officer had immediately appeared and was not so much welcoming her in, as drawing her in; pulling at her arm, gently but very firmly, as if already commencing the process of redemption, manifesting the iron goodness beneath the common flesh.

The place proved to look quite agreeable (as well as most astonishingly cheap, to judge from the prominently placed list of charges): more like a normal hotel, though simple and scrubbed, than like Margaret's idea of a Salvation Army hostel in England, concerning which *Major Barbara* was her most recent authority. Margaret's room contained a Bible, a book in Swedish expounding the Bible, a holy picture, and a selection of Swedish tracts; there seemed to be no reference to any more direct programme of observance in the establishment.

At one moment, however, when Margaret was lying down, there was a knock at the door, and the officer who had received her, handed her a tract in English. It was entitled 'Purification', and the woman passed it over unsmilingly. Margaret had realised already that the woman had very little English. Now Margaret got the impression that the English tract was the fruit of searching in cupboards and chests for something suitable for the visitor from abroad. She felt mildly appreciative of so much trouble on her behalf and smiled as gratefully as she could. The woman went silently away.

There seemed to be no further attempt at Margaret's conversion.

Indeed, she was perfectly free to go off into the town and eat there or go to the cinema. There was no real reason why she should not be, but she felt faintly surprised all the same. A more real difficulty was that she had already very much seen all there was to be seen in Sovastad, and also very much wanted not to meet at the moment anyone there whom she knew. She

therefore read for much of the day and industriously washed things; lunched in the hotel or hostel or whatever it properly was (the food was primitive but good); and confined herself to sneaking out to dinner in a café she had not before entered. She did not read the tract on purification.

She found the café disappointing. She was hidden away in a corner and served with a rudeness and indifference she had not previously met with in Sweden – or perhaps elsewhere either. But Margaret had not travelled very much, and still less on her own. She knew that lone women were often said not to be popular with waiters, or even with restaurant managements. 'No wonder,' she thought, 'that, with one thing and another, women tend to retreat into their little nests.' Altogether, she reflected, her short period of time away from Henry might well, in one way and another, have been the most vivid and informative of her entire life. She tried to put away the thought. It might at all times be a mistake to know more than one's husband. She had never before noticed the Swedes as being so dour and unobliging, but that was doubtless something to be learnt too.

That night Margaret slept brokenly and badly. There was heavy traffic in the street outside. Margaret wondered how much worse it would be when Henry's road was completed; thought warmly of Colonel Adamski; and tried to deflect her mind, though, lying there awake, it was difficult. She explained to herself that she had, after all, consumed very little energy that day; done little but lie about and ruminate.

At some dark and unknown hour, there was a tap at the door. It actually woke Margaret up.

The woman officer entered. Could this be another, Margaret instantly thought, who did not sleep? It seemed very unlikely, despite Adamski's emphasis upon the all-sorts-to-make-a-world theme.

The woman was carrying a candle. She walked towards the bed and, without preliminary, asked in her strong accent 'Would you like me to pray with you? I'm afraid I can pray only in Swedish.'

Margaret sat up, with a view to showing some kind of respect. Then she felt that the black nightdress which Henry liked, might here be a mistake.

'It's very kind of you,' she replied uncertainly.

'Do not despair,' said the woman. 'There is pardon for all. For all who seek it on their knees.'

'But if I could not understand you –' said Margaret, trying to cover her unsuitable apparel with her arms. It was neither a very ready nor a very gracious reply, but Margaret, newly awakened from scanty sleep, could think of nothing else.

The woman gazed at her from behind the candle in its cheap tin candlestick.

'We never force salvation upon any,' she said, after a longish pause. 'Those who are able to find it seek it on their own.'

It did seem to Margaret that the woman, having decided to appear at all, could have been more cordial; but she thought she had heard that something of what the woman had said was an item of Salvation Army philosophy.

The woman turned and walked away, shielding the candle-flame with her left hand, and quietly closing the door. Margaret felt that she herself would have been obscurely glad of something further; but had to admit that she had offered little encouragement. She returned to her disturbed and scrappy slumbers. The night seemed very long as well as shockingly noisy; and Margaret had troubled thoughts about the morrow.

In the morning, the woman officer was merely quiet and efficient, though still unsmiling, at least where Margaret was concerned. Margaret wished she could have eaten more of the pleasant breakfast, but found that her mind was too full of conflict. Henry was due to arrive before lunch, and in due course she set off for the railway station, this time carrying her own bag. The place where she had stayed seemed to think it the normal thing to do. They did not offer to send for a taxi, and Margaret felt one could hardly ask. Nor did she much care for the taxi-drivers of Sovastad. Perhaps her muscles had strengthened a little, as her vision, for better or for worse, had a little cleared.

'Had a good time?'

'Lovely.'

'You look a bit peeky.'

'I didn't sleep very well last night.'

'Missing me, I hope?'

'I expect so. How did you get on in Stockholm?'

'Bloody. These Swedes just aren't like us English.'

'Poor Henry.'

'In fact, I've got a problem on my hands. I'll tell you all about it over lunch.'

Which Henry did. Margaret could not complain that he was one of those husbands who keep from their wives everything that they themselves take seriously. And, immediately lunch was over, Henry had to dash off to a different conference with Larsson, and Falkenberg, and the other local ogres. Margaret did not have to consider further, as she had been considering now for more than twenty-four hours, how much she should tell Henry. It was unlikely that at any time she would have to tell him anything crucial about what had happened to her. 'You're still looking under the weather, old girl,' said Henry, as he tore off. 'Even the reception people and the waiter seemed to notice it. I saw them glancing at you. I don't know when I shall be back. I should go and get some sleep. Just trot upstairs and relax.'

He kissed her – really most affectionately.

*

Margaret did not feel at all like sleep; nor, for that matter, did she feel particularly out of sorts. None the less, she went to their room, took off her dress, and sprawled on the bed in her blue lambswool dressing-gown. It was quite reasonable, after last night's traffic, that she should be short of rest, and perhaps even show it. All the same, no sleep came; and Margaret faced again the problem that there was nothing more to do in Sovastad. Henry's

solution to that would undoubtedly be a resumption of sociabilities with the Larssons and Falkenbergs and their kind; which, as he had already observed, would kill two birds with one stone, keep Margaret occupied while assisting business. One reason why Margaret felt unattracted was the time-limit on such associations: she could not, on the instant, become gay and intimate with strangers, and then, on the instant, cut it all off. And it was even worse when the time of cessation was so mobile and indefinite. Margaret could only give, or even take, when she had some consciousness of continuity. Probably, she thought gloomily, it was a serious limitation in the wife of a business man.

In the end, she put on her dress once more, went out to buy three more postcards, and sent them off to her children. She continued to prevent her mind from dwelling upon all that had happened since the previous triptych of postcards to Dinah, Hazel, and Jeremy.

*

But it was not until well past midnight that she began to feel alarmed: to be precise, when she heard the tinkling church clock strike three, as she had heard it strike one and two.

Even then, she thought, it might have been simply the fact that once more she was sleeping with Henry in the room. Heaven knew that Henry slept noisily enough to keep anyone awake, especially one who a second time had exerted herself so little during the day. Henry rolled and squirmed. He groaned and snored and panted. Sometimes he cried out. Margaret had to admit that Henry was not (to use his own idiom) good publicity for the institution of slumber. Not that many would sympathise with his wife's predicament: it was too utterly ridiculous, and probably too familiar also. A good wife would take it in her stride; restricted though the stride of a good wife might be.

The tinkling clock struck four and five and six, and Margaret never slept at all. It also struck a single, delicate note at the intermediate half-hours. At some time after half past six, with heavy rain, which had begun to fall about an hour earlier, beating drearily against the bedroom window, Henry sat up, trained auxiliary to the day's commands.

At breakfast, he said that she still looked odd, and she noticed that he was watching for the Swedes to be eyeing her. She still did not feel anything out of the ordinary. She had said nothing to Henry about not sleeping. She remarked to herself that to miss one night's sleep was nothing at all by the standard of people who slept badly. Or, at least, by the proclaimed standard. She had been immensely exposed to the suggestion of insomnia; could hardly have been more exposed. Normality, her own possibly rather notable normality of somnolence, would probably be restored when she was returned to her own proper bed. On present evidence, that looked like being the day after tomorrow, but one never knew. The road ruled all.

'Hedvig Falkenberg was asking after you,' said Henry. 'Rather pointedly, I thought. Make some kind of contact, will you? I can't have a coolness with the Falkenbergs on my hands. On top of everything else. They can be damned sensitive, these foreigners.'

Margaret more or less promised, and meant to keep her word. She did not even have to tackle the terrifying Swedish telephone, as one would at home. She had merely to walk the half mile or so up to the Falkenbergs' house on its low ridge above the town. Visitors seemed at all times to be not merely welcome but awaited. The walk would do her good. Even the steady rain might wake her up or make her sleep: it was striking how a single force could lead to antithetical results. But Margaret let the hours pass and did nothing. And when Henry returned that night, she did not even have to make an excuse.

'Everything's settled, Molly,' he cried, almost exuberantly. 'Thank God, we can go home tomorrow.'

Possibly it was owing to the lifting of the weight on his mind that, on this second night after his return from Stockholm, Henry slept much more quietly; much better, as people say. Margaret heard him purring gently and evenly as a child: hour after hour after hour, while the church clock chimed and the rain pattered. As this second sleepless night slowly passed, Margaret ceased finding explanations, making excuses, pretending to herself.

If only she could walk about! A few minutes after the stroke of five, she got out of bed, and, in almost total silence, drew on her shirt, trousers, and anorak. She stood for a long time looking out at the infinitely slow and laboured dawn. She would have liked to escape, but in this place the door would be locked, and a night porter, even if there was one, would shrink away from her and be beyond communication. She must still, for a spell, be reasonable.

She hid away her clothes and crept back into bed. Henry was still purring away, but as she drew near to him, he seemed to give a single, curious sigh, as of a man dreaming about the past which is always so much sweeter than the present.

*

'Henry,' said Margaret after breakfast. 'You have said several times that I'm not looking very well. As a matter of fact, I haven't been sleeping. And quite by chance, I've found a place where people from all over the world go when they don't sleep. Would you mind very much if I stayed behind for a while? Just for a short time, of course?'

The argument took every bit as long as she had expected, but Margaret was developing new resources now, even though she had little idea of what they were.

'I'll let you know immediately I get out of the wood,' she promised. 'It's one of those things you have to live through until you emerge the other side.'

The Swords (1969)

Corazón malherido

Por cinco espadas

-FEDERICO GARCIA LORCA

My first experience?

My first experience was far more of a test than anything that has ever happened to me since in that line. Not more agreeable, but certainly more testing. I have noticed several times that it is to beginners that strange things happen, and often, I think, to beginners only. When you know about a thing, there's just nothing to it. This kind of thing included—anyway, in most cases. After the first six women, say, or seven, or eight, the rest come much of a muchness.

I was a beginner all right; raw as a spring onion. What's more, I was a real mother's boy: scared stiff of life, and crass ignorant. Not that I want to sound disrespectful to my old mother. She's as good as they come, and I still hit it off better with her than with most other females.

She had a brother, my Uncle Elias. I should have said that we're all supposed to be descended from one of the big pottery families, but I don't know how true it is. My gran had little bits of pot to prove it, but it's always hard to be sure. After my dad was killed in an accident, my mother asked my Uncle Elias to take me into his business. He was a grocery salesman in a moderate way—and nothing but cheap lines. He said I must first learn the ropes by going out on the road. My mother was thoroughly upset because of my dad having died in a smash, and because she thought I was bound to be in moral danger, but there was nothing she could do about it, and on the road I went.

It was true enough about the moral danger, but I was too simple and too scared to involve myself. As far as I could, I steered clear even of the other

chaps I met who were on the road with me. I was pretty certain they would be bad influences, and I was always bound to be the baby of the party anyway. I was dead rotten at selling and I was utterly lonely—not just in a manner of speaking, but truly lonely. I hated the life but Uncle Elias had promised to see me all right and I couldn't think of what else to do. I stuck it on the road for more than two years, and then I heard of my present job with the building society—read about it, actually, in the local paper—so that I was able to tell Uncle Elias what he could do with his cheap groceries.

For most of the time we stopped in small hotels—some of them weren't bad either, both the room and the grub—but in a few towns there were special lodgings known to Uncle Elias, where I and Uncle Elias's regular traveller, a sad chap called Bantock, were ordered by Uncle Elias to go. To this day I don't know exactly why. At the time I was quite sure that there was some kickback for my uncle in it, which was the obvious thing to suppose, but I've come since to wonder if the old girls who kept the lodgings might not have been my uncle's fancy women in the more or less distant past. At least once, I got as far as asking Bantock about it, but he merely said he didn't know what the answer was. There was very little that Bantock admitted to knowing about anything beyond the current prices of soapflakes and Scotch. He had been 42 years on the road for my uncle when one day he dropped dead of a thrombosis in Rochdale. Mrs Bantock, at least, had been one of my uncle's women off and on for years. That was something everyone knew.

These women who kept the lodgings certainly behaved as if what I've said was true. You've never seen or heard such dives. Noises all night so that it was impossible to sleep properly, and often half-dressed tarts beating on your door and screaming that they'd been swindled or strangled. Some of the travellers even brought in boys, which is something I have never been able to understand. You read about it and hear about it, and I've often seen it happen, as I say, but I still don't understand it. And there was I in the middle of it all, pure and unspotted. The woman who kept the place often cheeked me for it. I don't know how old Bantock got on. I never found myself in one of these places at the same time as he was there. But the funny part was that my mother thought I was extra safe in one of these special lodgings,

because they were all particularly guaranteed by her brother, who made Bantock and me go to them for our own good.

Of course it was only on some of the nights on the road. But always it was when I was quite alone. I noticed that at the time when Bantock was providing me with a few introductions and openings, they were always in towns where we could stay in commercial hotels. All the same, Bantock had to go to these special places when the need arose, just as much as I did, even though he never would talk about them.

One of the towns where there was a place on Uncle Elias's list was Wolverhampton. I fetched up there for the first time, after I had been on the job for perhaps four or five months. It was by no means my first of these lodgings, but for that very reason my heart sank all the more as I set eyes on the place and was let in by the usual bleary-eyed cow in curlers and a dirty overall.

There was absolutely nothing to do. Nowhere even to sit and watch the telly. All you could think of was to go out and get drunk, or bring someone in with you from the pictures. Neither idea appealed very much to me, and I found myself just wandering about the town. It must have been late spring or early summer, because it was pleasantly warm, though not too hot, and still only dusk when I had finished my tea, which I had to find in a café, because the lodging did not even provide tea.

I was strolling about the streets of Wolverhampton, with all the girls giggling at me, or so it seemed, when I came upon a sort of small fair. Not knowing the town at all, I had drifted into the rundown area up by the old canal. The main streets were quite wide, but they had been laid out for daytime traffic to the different works and railway yards, and were now quiet and empty, except for the occasional lorry and the boys and girls playing around at some of the corners. The narrow streets running off contained lines of small houses, but a lot of the houses were empty, with windows broken or boarded up, and holes in the roof. I should have turned back, but for the sound made by the fair; not pop songs on the amplifiers, and not the pounding of the old steam organs, but more a sort of high tinkling, which somehow fitted in with the warm evening and the rosy twilight. I couldn't at first make out what the noise was, but I had nothing else to do, very much

not, and I looked around the empty back streets, until I could find what was going on.

It proved to be a very small fair indeed; just half a dozen stalls, where a few kids were throwing rings or shooting off toy rifles, two or three covered booths, and, in the middle, one very small roundabout. It was this that made the tinkling music. The roundabout *looked* pretty too; with snow-queen and icing sugar effects in the centre, and different coloured sleighs going round, each just big enough for two, and each, as I remember, with a coloured light high up at the peak. And in the middle was a very pretty, blonde girl dressed as some kind of pierrette. Anyway she seemed very pretty at that time to me. Her job was to collect the money from the people riding in the sleighs, but the trouble was that there weren't any. Not a single one. There weren't many people about at all, and inevitably the girl caught my eye. I felt I looked a Charley as I had no one to ride with, and I just turned away. I shouldn't have dared to ask the girl herself to ride with me, and I imagine she wouldn't have been allowed to in any case. Unless, perhaps, it was her roundabout.

The fair had been set up on a plot of land which was empty simply because the houses which had stood on it had been demolished or just fallen down. Tall, blank factory walls towered up on two sides of it, and the ground was so rough and uneven that it was like walking on lumpy rocks at the seaside. There was nothing in the least permanent about the fair. It was very much here today and gone tomorrow. I should not have wondered if it had had no real business to have set up there at all. I doubted very much if it had come to any kind of agreement for the use of the land. I thought at once that the life must be a hard one for those who owned the fair. You could see why fairs like that have so largely died out from what things used to be in my gran's day, who was always talking about the wonderful fairs and circuses when she was a girl. Such customers as there were, were almost all mere kids, even though kids do have most of the money nowadays. These kids were doing a lot of their spending at a tiny stall where a drab-looking woman was selling ice-cream and toffee-apples. I thought it would have been much simpler and more profitable to concentrate on that, and enter the catering business rather than trying to provide entertainment for people who prefer to get it in their houses. But very probably I was in a gloomy frame

of mind that evening. The fair was pretty and old-fashioned, but no one could say it cheered you up.

The girl on the roundabout could still see me, and I was sure was looking at me reproachfully—and probably contemptuously as well. With that layout, she was in the middle of things and impossible to get away from. I should just have mooched off, especially since the people running the different stalls were all beginning to shout at me, as pretty well the only full adult in sight, when, going round, I saw a booth in more or less the farthest corner, where the high factory walls made an angle. It was a square tent of very dirty red and white striped canvas, and over the crumpled entrance flap was a rough-edged, dark painted, horizontal board, with written on it in faint gold capital letters THE SWORDS. That was all there was. Night was coming on fast, but there was no light outside the tent and none shining through from inside. You might have thought it was a store of some kind.

For some reason, I put out my hand and touched the hanging flap. I am sure I should never have dared actually to draw it aside and peep in. But a touch was enough. The flap was pulled back at once, and a young man stood there, sloping his head to one side so as to draw me in. I could see at once that some kind of show was going on. I did not really want to watch it, but felt that I should look a complete imbecile if I just ran away across the fairground, small though it was.

"Two bob," said the young man, dropping the dirty flap, and sticking out his other hand, which was equally dirty. He wore a green sweater, mended but still with holes, grimy grey trousers, and grimier sandshoes. Sheer dirt was so much my first impression of the place that I might well have fled after all, had I felt it possible. I had not noticed this kind of griminess about the rest of the fair.

Running away, however, wasn't on. There were so few people inside. Dotted about the bare, bumpy ground, with bricks and broken glass sticking out from the hard earth, were 20 or 30 wooden chairs, none of them seeming to match, most of them broken or defective in one way or another, all of them chipped and off-colour. Scattered among these hard chairs was an audience of seven. I know it was seven, because I had no difficulty in counting, and because soon it mattered. I made the eighth. All of them were

in single units and all were men: this time men and not boys. I think that I was the youngest among them, by quite a long way.

And the show was something I have never seen or heard of since. Nor even read of. Not exactly.

There was a sort of low platform of dark and discoloured wood up against the back of the tent—probably right on to the factory walls outside. There was a burly chap standing on it, giving the spiel, in a pretty rough delivery. He had tight yellow curls, the colour of cheap lemonade but turning grey, and a big red face, with a splay nose, and very dark red lips. He also had small eyes and ears. The ears didn't seem exactly opposite one another, if you know what I mean. He wasn't much to look at, though I felt he was very strong, and could probably have taken on all of us in the tent single-handed and come out well on top. I couldn't decide how old he was—either then or later. (Yes, I did see him again—twice.) I should imagine he was nearing 50, and he didn't look in particularly good condition, but it seemed as though he had just been made with more thew and muscle than most people are. He was dressed like the youth at the door, except that the sweater of the chap on the platform was not green but dark blue, as if he were a seaman, or perhaps acting one. He wore the same dirty grey trousers and sandshoes as the other man. You might almost have thought the place was some kind of boxing booth.

But it wasn't. On the chap's left (and straight ahead of where I sat at the edge of things and in the back row) a girl lay sprawled out facing us in an upright canvas chair, as faded and battered as everything else in the outfit. She was dressed up like a French chorus, in a tight and shiny black thing, cut low, and black fishnet stockings, and those shiny black shoes with super high heels that many men go for in such a big way. But the total effect was not particularly sexy, all the same. The different bits of costume had all seen better days, like everything else, and the girl herself looked more sick than spicy. Under other conditions, I thought to begin with, she might have been pretty enough, but she had made herself up with green powder, actually choosing it apparently, or having it chosen for her, and her hair, done in a tight bun, like a ballet dancer's, was not so much mousy as plain colourless. On top of all this, she was lying over the chair, rather than sitting in it, just

as if she was feeling faint or about to be ill. Certainly she was doing nothing at all to lead the chaps on. Not that I myself should have wanted to be led. Or so I thought at the start.

And in front of her, at the angle of the platform, was this pile of swords. They were stacked criss-cross, like cheese-straws, on top of a low stool, square and black, the sort of thing they make in Sedgeley and Wednesfield and sell as Japanese, though this specimen was quite plain and undecorated, even though more than a bit chipped. There must have been 30 or 40 swords, as the pile had four corners to it, where the hilts of the swords were set diagonally above one another. It struck me later that perhaps there was one sword for each seat, in case there was ever a full house in the tent.

If I had not seen the notice outside, I might not have realized they *were* swords, or not at first. There was nothing gleaming about them, and nothing decorative. The blades were a dull grey, and the hilts were made of some black stuff, possibly even plastic. They looked thoroughly mass-produced and industrial, and I could not think where they might have been got. They were not fencing foils but something much solider, and the demand for real swords nowadays must be mainly ceremonial, and less and less even of that. Possibly these swords came from suppliers for the stage, though I doubt that too. Anyway, they were thoroughly dingy swords, no credit at all to the regiment.

I do not know how long the show had been going on before I arrived, or if the man in the seaman's sweater had offered any explanations. Almost the first thing I heard was him saying, "And now, gentlemen, which of you is going to be the first?"

There was no movement or response of any land. Of course there never is.

"Come *on*," said the seaman, not very politely. I felt that he was so accustomed to the backwardness of his audiences that he was no longer prepared to pander to it. He did not strike me as a man of many words, even though speaking appeared to be his job. He had a strong accent, which I took to be Black Country, though I wasn't in a position properly to be sure at that time of my life, and being myself a Londoner.

Nothing happened.

"What you think you've paid your money for?" cried the seaman, more truculent, I thought, than sarcastic.

"You tell us," said one of the men on the chairs. He happened to be the man nearest to me, though in front of me.

It was not a very clever thing to say, and the seaman turned it to account.

"You," he shouted, sticking out his thick, red forefinger at the man who had cheeked him. "Come along up. We've got to start somewhere."

The man did not move. I became frightened by my own nearness to him. I might be picked on next, and I did not even know what was expected of me, if I responded.

The situation was saved by the appearance of a volunteer. At the other side of the tent, a man stood up and said, "I'll do it."

The only light in the tent came from a single Tilley lamp hissing away (none too safely, I thought) from the crosspiece of the roof, but the volunteer looked to me exactly like everyone else.

"At last," said the seaman, still rather rudely. "Come on then."

The volunteer stumbled across the rough ground, stepped on to my side of the small platform, and stood right in front of the girl. The girl seemed to make no movement. Her head was thrown so far back that, as she was some distance in front of me, I could not see her eyes at all clearly. I could not even be certain whether they were open or closed. "Pick up a sword," said the seaman sharply.

The volunteer did so, in a rather gingerly way. It looked like the first time he had ever had his hand on such a thing, and, of course, I never had either. The volunteer stood there with the sword in his hand, looking an utter fool. His skin looked grey by the light of the Tilley, he was very thin, and his hair was failing badly.

The seaman seemed to let him stand there for quite a while, as if out of devilry, or perhaps resentment at the way he had to make a living. To me the atmosphere in the dirty tent seemed full of tension and unpleasantness, but the other men in the audience were still lying about on their hard chairs looking merely bored.

After quite a while, the seaman, who had been facing the audience, and speaking to the volunteer out of the corner of his mouth, half-turned on his heel, and still not looking right at the volunteer, snapped out: "What are you waiting for? There are others to come, though we could do with more."

At this, another member of the audience began to whistle "Why are we waiting?" I felt he was getting at the seaman or showman, or whatever he should be called, rather than at the volunteer.

"Go on," shouted the seaman, almost in the tone of a drill instructor. "Stick it in."

And then it happened, this extraordinary thing.

The volunteer seemed to me to tremble for a moment, and then plunged the sword right into the girl on the chair. As he was standing between me and her, I could not see where the sword entered, but I could see that the man seemed to press it right in, because almost the whole length of it seemed to disappear. What I could have no doubt about at all was the noise the sword made. A curious thing was that we are so used to at least the idea of people being stuck through with swords, that, even though, naturally, I had never before seen anything of the kind, I had no doubt at all of what the man had done. The noise of the sword tearing through the flesh was only what I should have expected. But it was quite distinct even above the hissing of the Tilley. And quite long drawn out too. And horrible.

I could sense the other men in the audience gathering themselves together on the instant and suddenly coming to life. I could still see little of what precisely had happened.

"Pull it out," said the seaman, quite casually, but as if speaking to a moron. He was still only half-turned towards the volunteer, and still looking

straight in front of him. He was not looking at anything; just holding himself in control while getting through a familiar routine.

The volunteer pulled out the sword. I could again hear that unmistakable sound.

The volunteer still stood facing the girl, but with the tip of the sword resting on the platform. I could see no blood. Of course I thought I had made some complete misinterpretation, been fooled like a kid. Obviously it was some kind of conjuring.

"Kiss her if you want to," said the seaman. "It's included in what you've paid."

And the man did, even though I could only see his back. With the sword drooping from his hand, he leaned forwards and downwards. I think it was a slow and loving kiss, not a smacking and public kiss, because this time I could hear nothing.

The seaman gave the volunteer all the time in the world for it, and, for some odd reason, there was no whistling or catcalling from the rest of us; but in the end, the volunteer slowly straightened up.

"Please put back the sword," said the seaman, sarcastically polite.

The volunteer carefully returned it to the heap, going to some trouble to make it lie as before.

I could now see the girl. She was sitting up. Her hands were pressed together against her left side, where, presumably, the sword had gone in. But there was still no sign of blood, though it was hard to be certain in the bad light. And the strangest thing was that she now looked not only happy, with her eyes very wide open and a little smile on her lips, but, in spite of that green powder, beautiful too, which I was far from having thought in the first place.

The volunteer passed between the girl and me in order to get back to his seat. Even though the tent was almost empty, he returned to his original

place religiously. I got a slightly better look at him. He still looked just like everyone else.

"Next," said the seaman, again like a sergeant numbering off.

This time there was no hanging back. Three men rose to their feet immediately, and the seaman had to make a choice.

"You then," he said, jabbing out his thick finger towards the centre of the tent.

The man picked was elderly, bald, plump, respectable-looking, and wearing a dark suit. He might have been a retired railway foreman or electricity inspector. He had a slight limp, probably taken in the way of his work.

The course of events was very much the same, but the second comer was readier and in less need of prompting, including about the kiss. His kiss was as slow and quiet as the first man's had been: paternal perhaps. When the elderly man stepped away, I saw that the girl was holding her two hands against the centre of her stomach. It made me squirm to look.

And then came the third man. When he went back to his seat, the girl's hands were to her throat.

The fourth man, on the face of it a rougher type, with a cloth cap (which, while on the platform, he never took off) and a sports jacket as filthy and worn out as the tent, apparently drove the sword into the girl's left thigh, straight through the fishnet stocking. When he stepped off the platform, she was clasping her leg, but looking so pleased that you'd have thought a great favour had been done her. And still I could see no blood.

I did not really know whether or not I wanted to see more of the details. Raw as I was, it would have been difficult for me to decide.

I didn't have to decide, because I dared not shift in any case to a seat with a better view. I considered that a move like that would quite probably result in my being the next man the seaman called up. And one thing I knew for certain was that whatever exactly was being done, I was not going to be one

who did it. Whether it was conjuring, or something different that I knew nothing about, I was not going to get involved.

And, of course, if I stayed, my turn must be coming close in any case.

Still, the fifth man called was not me. He was a tall, lanky, perfectly black Negro. I had not especially spotted him as such before. He appeared to drive the sword in with all the force you might expect of a black man, even though he was so slight, then threw it on the floor of the platform with a clatter, which no one else had done before him, and actually drew the girl to her feet when kissing her. When he stepped back, his foot struck the sword. He paused for a second, gazing at the girl, then carefully put the sword back on the heap.

The girl was still standing, and it passed across my mind that the Negro might try to kiss her again. But he didn't. He went quietly back to his place. Behind the scenes of it all, there appeared to be some rules, which all the other men knew about. They behaved almost as though they came quite often to the show, if a show was what it was.

Sinking down once more into her dilapidated canvas chair, the girl kept her eyes fixed on mine. I could not even tell what colour her eyes were, but the fact of the matter is that they turned my heart right over. I was so simple and inexperienced that nothing like that had ever happened to me before in my whole life. The incredible green powder made no difference. Nothing that had just been happening made any difference. I wanted that girl more than I had ever wanted anything. And I don't mean I just wanted her body. That comes later in life. I wanted to love her and tousle her and all the other, better things we want before the time comes when we know that however much we want them, we're not going to get them.

But, in justice to myself, I must say that I did not want to take my place in a queue for her.

That was about the last thing I wanted. And it was one chance in three that I should be next to be called. I drew a deep breath and managed to scuttle out. I can't pretend it was difficult. I was sitting near the back of the tent, as I've said, and no one tried to stop me. The lad at the entrance merely gaped

at me like a fish. No doubt he was quite accustomed to the occasional patron leaving early. I fancied that the bruiser on the platform was in the act of turning to me at the very instant I got up, but I knew it was probably imagination on my part. I don't think he spoke, nor did any of the other men react. Most men at shows of that kind prefer to behave as if they were invisible. I did get mixed up in the greasy tent flap, and the lad in the green sweater did nothing to help, but that was all. I streaked across the fairground, still almost deserted, and still with the roundabout tinkling away, all for nothing, but very prettily. I tore back to my nasty bedroom, and locked myself in.

On and off, there was the usual fuss and schemozzle in the house, and right through the hours of darkness. I know, because I couldn't sleep. I couldn't have slept that night if I'd been lying between damask sheets in the Hilton Hotel. The girl on the platform had got deep under my skin, green face and all: the girl and the show too, of course. I think I can truly say that what I experienced that night altered my whole angle on life, and it had nothing to do with the rows that broke out in the other bedrooms, or the cackling and bashing on the staircase, or the constant pulling the plug, which must have been the noisiest in the Midlands, especially as it took six or seven pulls or more for each flush. That night I really grasped the fact that most of the time we have no notion of what we really want, or we lose sight of it. And the even more important fact that what we really want just doesn't fit in with life as a whole, or very seldom. Most folk learn slowly, and never altogether learn at all. I seemed to learn all at once.

Or perhaps not quite, because there was very much more to come.

The next morning I had calls to make, but well before the time arrived for the first of them I had sneaked back to that tiny, battered, little fairground. I even skipped breakfast, but breakfast in Uncle Elias's special lodging was very poor anyway, though a surprising number turned up for it each day. You wondered where so many had been hiding away all night. I don't know what I expected to find at the fair. Perhaps I wasn't sure I should find the fair there at all.

But I did. In full daylight, it looked smaller, sadder, and more utterly hopeless for making a living even than the night before. The weather was

absolutely beautiful, and so many of the houses in the immediate area were empty, to say nothing of the factories, that there were very few people around. The fair itself was completely empty, which took me by surprise. I had expected some sort of gypsy scene and had failed to realize that there was nowhere on the lot for even gypsies to sleep. The people who worked the fair must have gone to bed at home, like the rest of the world. The plot of land was surrounded by a wire-mesh fence, put up by the owner to keep out tramps and meth-drinkers, but by now the fence wasn't up to much, as you would expect, and, after looking round, I had no difficulty in scrambling through a hole in it, which the lads of the village had carved out for fun and from having nothing better to do. I walked over to the dingy booth in the far corner, and tried to lift the flap.

It proved to have been tied up at several places and apparently from the inside. I could not see how the person doing the tying had got out of the tent when he had finished, but that was the sort of trick of the trade you would expect of fairground folk. I found it impossible to see inside the tent at all without using my pocketknife, which I should have hesitated to do at the best of times, but while I was fiddling around, I heard a voice just behind me.

"What's up with you?"

There was a very small, old man standing at my back. I had certainly not heard him come up, even though the ground was so rough and lumpy. He was hardly more than a dwarf, he was as brown as a horse-chestnut or very nearly, and there was not a hair on his head.

"I wondered what was inside," I said feebly.

"A great big python, two miles long, that don't even pay its rent," said the little man.

"How's that?" I asked. "Hasn't it a following?"

"Old-fashioned," said the little man. "Old-fashioned and out of date. Doesn't appeal to the women. The women don't like the big snakes. But the

women have the money these times, *and* the power and the glory too." He changed his tone. "You're trespassing."

"Sorry, old man," I said. "I couldn't hold myself back on a lovely morning like this."

"I'm the watchman," said the little man. "I used to have snakes too. Little ones, dozens and dozens of them. All over me, and every one more poisonous than the next. Eyes darting, tongues flicking, scales shimmering: then in, right home, then back, then in again, then back. Still in the end, it wasn't a go. There's a time and a span for all things. But I like to keep around. So now I'm the watchman. While the job lasts. While anything lasts. Move on then. Move on."

I hesitated.

"This big snake you talk of," I began, "this python—"

But he interrupted quite shrilly.

"There's no more to be said. Not to the likes of you, any road. Off the ground you go, and sharply. Or I'll call the police constable. He and I work hand in glove. I take care to keep it that way. You may not have heard that trespass is a breach of the peace. Stay here and you'll be sorry for the rest of your life."

The little man was actually squaring up to me, even thought the top of his brown skull (not shiny, by the way, but matt and patchy, as if he had some trouble with it) rose hardly above my waist. Clearly, he was daft.

As I had every kind of reason for going, I went. I did not even ask the little man about the times of performances that evening, or if there were any. Inside myself, I had no idea whether I should be back, even if there were performances, as there probably were.

I set about my calls. I'd had no sleep, and, since last night's tea, no food, and my head was spinning like a top, but I won't say I did my business any worse than usual. I probably felt at the time that I did, but now I doubt it.

Private troubles, I have since noticed, make very little difference to the way most of us meet the outside world, and as for food and sleep, they don't matter at all until weeks and months have passed.

I pushed on then, more or less in the customary way (though, in my case, the customary way, at that job, wasn't up to very much at the best of times), and all the while mulling over and around what had happened to me, until the time came for dinner. I had planned to eat in the café where I had eaten the night before, but I found myself in a different part of the city, which, of course, I didn't know at all, and, feeling rather faint and queer, fell instead into the first place there was.

And there, in the middle of the floor, believe it or not, sitting at a Formica-topped table, was my girl with the green powder, and, beside her, the seaman or showman, looking more than ever like a run-down boxer.

I had not seriously expected ever to set eyes on the girl again. It was not, I thought, the kind of thing that happens. At the very most I might have gone again to the queer show, but I don't think I really would have done, when I came to think out what it involved.

The girl had wiped off the green powder, and was wearing a black coat and skirt and a white blouse, a costume you might perhaps have thought rather too old for her, and the same fishnet stockings. The man was dressed exactly as he had been the night before, except that he wore heavy boots instead of dirty sandshoes, heavy and mud-caked, as if he had been walking through fields.

Although it was the dinner-hour, the place was almost empty, with a dozen unoccupied tables, and these two sitting in the centre. I must almost have passed out.

But I wasn't really given time. The man in the jersey recognized me at once. He stood up and beckoned to me with his thick arm. "Come and join us." The girl had stood up too.

There was nothing else I could do but what he said.

The man actually drew back a chair for me (they were all painted in different, bright colours, and had been reseated in new leatherette), and even the girl waited until I had sat down before sitting down herself.

"Sorry you missed the end of last night's show," said the man.

"I had to get back to my lodgings, I suddenly realized." I made it up quite swiftly. "I'm new to the town," I added.

"It can be difficult when you're new," said the man. "What'll you have?"

He spoke as if we were on licensed premises, but it was pretty obvious we weren't, and I hesitated.

"Tea or coffee?"

"Tea, please," I said.

"Another tea, Berth," called out the man. I saw that the two of them were both drinking coffee, but I didn't like the look of it, any more than I usually do.

"I'd like something to eat as well," I said, when the waitress brought the tea. "Thank you very much," I said to the man.

"Sandwiches: York ham, salt beef, or luncheon meat. Pies. Sausage rolls," said the waitress. She had a very bad stye on her left lower eyelid.

"I'll have a pie," I said, and, in due course, she brought one, with some salad on the plate, and the bottle of sauce. I really required something hot, but there it was.

"Come again tonight," said the man.

"I'm not sure I'll be able to."

I was finding it difficult even to drink my tea properly, as my hands were shaking so badly, and I couldn't think how I should cope with a cold pie.

"Come on the house, if you like. As you missed your turn last night."

The girl, who had so far left the talking to the other, smiled at me very sweetly and personally, as if there was something quite particular between us. Her white blouse was open very low, so that I saw more than I really should, even though things are quite different today from what they once were. Even without the green powder, she was a very pale girl, and her body looked as if it might be even whiter than her face, almost as white as her blouse. Also I could now see the colour of her eyes. They were green. Somehow I had known it all along.

"In any case," went on the man, "it won't make much difference with business like it is now."

The girl glanced at him as if she were surprised at his letting out something private, then looked at me again and said, "Do come." She said it in the friendliest, meltingest way, as if she really cared. What's more, she seemed to have some kind of foreign accent, which made her even more fascinating, if that were possible. She took a small sip of coffee.

"It's only that I might have another engagement that I couldn't get out of. I don't know right now."

"We mustn't make you break another engagement," said the girl, in her foreign accent, but sounding as if she meant just the opposite.

I managed a bit more candour. "I might get out of my engagement," I said, "but the truth is, if you don't mind my saying so, that I didn't greatly care for some of the others in the audience last night."

"I don't blame you," said the man very dryly, and rather to my relief, as you can imagine. "What would you say to a private show? A show just for you?" He spoke quite quietly, suggesting it as if it had been the most normal thing in the world, or as if I had been Charles Clore.

I was so taken by surprise that I blurted out, "What! Just me in the tent?"

"In your own home, I meant," said the man, still absolutely casually, and taking a noisy pull on his pink earthenware cup. As the man spoke, the girl shot a quick, devastating glance. It was exactly as if she softened everything inside me to water. And, absurdly enough, it was then that my silly pie arrived, with the bit of green salad, and the sauce. I had been a fool to ask for anything at all to eat, however much I might have needed it in theory.

"With or without the swords," continued the man, lighting a cheap-looking cigarette. "Madonna has been trained to do anything else you want. Anything you may happen to think of." The girl was gazing into her teacup.

I dared to speak directly to her. "Is your name really Madonna? It's nice."

"No," she said, speaking rather low. "Not really. It's my working name." She turned her head for a moment, and again our eyes met.

"There's no harm in it. We're not Catholics," said the man, "though Madonna was once."

"I like it," I said. I was wondering what to do about the pie. I could not possibly eat.

"Of course a private show would cost a bit more than two bob," said the man. "But it would be all to yourself, and, under those conditions, Madonna will do anything you feel like." I noticed that he was speaking just as he had spoken in the tent: looking not at me or at anyone else, but straight ahead into the distance, and as if he were repeating words he had used again and again and was fed up with but compelled to make use of.

I was about to tell him I had no money, which was more or less the case, but didn't.

"When could it be?" I said.

"Tonight, if you like," said the man. "Immediately after the regular show, and that won't be very late, as we don't do a ten or eleven o'clock house at a date like this. Madonna could be with you at a quarter to ten, easy. And she wouldn't necessarily have to hurry away either, not when there's no late-

night matinée. There'd be time for her to do a lot of her novelties if you'd care to see them. Items from her repertoire, as we call them. Got a good place for it, by the way? Madonna doesn't need much. Just a room with a lock on the door to keep out the non-paying patrons, and somewhere to wash her hands."

"Yes," I said. "As a matter of fact, the place I'm stopping at should be quite suitable, though I wish it was brighter, and a bit quieter too."

Madonna flashed another of her indescribably sweet glances at me. "I shan't mind," she said softly.

I wrote down the address on the corner of a paper I had found on my seat, and tore it off.

"Shall we call it ten pounds?" said the man, turning to look at me with his small eyes. "I usually ask twenty and sometimes fifty, but this is Wolverhampton not the Costa Brava, and you belong to the refined type."

"What makes you say that?" I asked; mainly in order to gain time for thinking what I could do about the money.

"I could tell by where you sat last night. At pretty well every show there's someone who picks that seat. It's a special seat for the refined types. I've learnt better now than to call them up, because it's not what they want. They're too refined to be called up, and I respect them for it. They often leave before the end, as you did. But I'm glad to have them in at any time. They raise the standard. Besides, they're the ones who are often interested in a private show, as you are, and willing to pay for it. I have to watch the business of the thing too."

"I haven't got ten pounds ready in spare cash," I said, "but I expect I can find it, even if I have to fiddle it."

"It's what you often have to do in this world," said the man. "Leastways if you like nice things."

"You've still got most of the day," said the girl, smiling encouragingly.

"Have another cup of tea?" said the man.

"No thanks very much."

"Sure?"

"Sure."

"Then we must move. We've an afternoon show, though it'll probably be only for a few kids. I'll tell Madonna to save herself as much as she can until the private affair tonight."

As they were going through the door on to the street, the girl looked back to throw me a glance over her shoulder, warm and secret. But when she was moving about, her clothes looked much too big for her, the skirt too long, the jacket and blouse too loose and droopy, as if they were not really her clothes at all. On top of everything else, I felt sorry for her. Whatever the explanation of last night, her life could not be an easy one.

They'd both been too polite to mention my pie. I stuffed it into my attaché case, of course without the salad, paid for it, and dragged off to my next call, which proved to be right across the town once more.

I didn't have to do anything dishonest to get the money.

It was hardly to be expected that my mind would be much on my work that afternoon, but I stuck to it as best I could, feeling that my life was getting into deep waters and that I had better keep land of some kind within sight, while it was still possible. It was as well that I did continue on my proper round of calls, because at one of the shops my immediate problem was solved for me without my having to lift a finger. The owner of the shop was a nice old gentleman with white hair, named Mr Edis, who seemed to take to me immediately I went through the door. He said at one point that I made a change from old Bantock with his attacks of asthma (I don't think I've so far mentioned Bantock's asthma, but I knew all about it), and that I seemed a good lad, with a light in my eyes. Those were his words, and I'm not likely to make a mistake about them just yet, seeing what he went on to. He asked me if I had anything to do that evening. Rather pleased with myself,

because it was not an answer I should have been able to make often before, not if I had been speaking the truth, I told him Yes, I had a date with a girl.

"Do you mean with a Wolverhampton girl?" asked Mr Edis.

"Yes. I've only met her since I've been in the town." I shouldn't have admitted that to most people, but there was something about Mr Edis that led me on and made me want to justify his good opinion of me.

"What's she like?" asked Mr Edis, half closing his eyes, so that I could see the red all round the edges of them.

"Gorgeous." It was the sort of thing people said, and my real feelings couldn't possibly have been put into words.

"Got enough small change to treat her properly?"

I had to think quickly, being taken so much by surprise, but Mr Edis went on before I had time to speak.

"So that you can cuddle her as you want?"

I could see that he was getting more and more excited.

"Well, Mr Edis," I said, "as a matter of fact, not quite enough. I'm still a beginner in my job, as you know."

I thought I might get a pound out of him, and quite likely only as a loan, the Midlands people being what we all know they are.

But on the instant he produced a whole fiver. He flapped it in front of my nose like a kipper.

"It's yours on one condition."

"I'll fit in if I can, Mr Edis."

"Come back tomorrow morning after my wife's gone out—she works as a traffic warden, and can't hardly get enough of it—come back here and tell

me all about what happens."

I didn't care for the idea at all, but I supposed that I could make up some lies, or even break my word and not go back at all, and I didn't seem to have much alternative.

"Why, of course, Mr Edis. Nothing to it."

He handed over the fiver at once.

"Good boy," he said. "Get what you're paying for out of her, and think of me while you're doing it, though I don't expect you will."

As for the other five pounds, I could probably manage to wangle it out of what I had, by scraping a bit over the next week or two, and cooking the cash book a trifle if necessary, as we all do. Anyway, and being the age I was, I hated all this talk about money. I hated the talk about it much more than I hated the job of having to find it. I did not see Madonna in that sort of way at all, and I should have despised myself if I had. Nor, to judge by how she spoke, did it seem the way in which she saw me. I could not really think of any other way in which she would be likely to see me, but I settled that one by trying not to think about the question at all.

My Uncle Elias's special lodging in Wolverhampton was not the kind of place where visitors just rang the bell and waited to be admitted by the footman. You had to know the form a bit, if you were to get in at all, not being a resident, and still more if, once inside, you were going to find the exact person you were looking for. At about half past nine I thought it best to start lounging around in the street outside. Not right on top of the house door, because that might have led to misunderstanding and trouble of some kind, but moving up and down the street, keeping both eyes open and an ear cocked for the patter of tiny feet on the pavement. It was almost dark, of course, but not quite. There weren't many people about but that was partly because it was raining gently, as it does in the Midlands: a soft, slow rain that you can hardly see, but extra wetting, or so it always feels. I am quite sure I should have taken up my position earlier if it hadn't been for the rain. Needless to say, I was like a cat on hot bricks. I had managed to get the pie inside me between calls during the afternoon. I struggled through it on a

bench just as the rain was beginning. And at about half past six I'd had a cup of tea and some beans in the café I'd been to the night before. I didn't want any of it. I just felt that I ought to eat something in view of what lay ahead of me. Though, of course, I had precious little idea of what that was. When it's truly your first experience, you haven't; no matter how much you've been told and managed to pick up. I'd have been in a bad state if it had been any woman that was supposed to be coming, let alone my lovely Madonna.

And there she was, on the dot, or even a little early. She was dressed in the same clothes as she had worn that morning. Too big for her and too old for her; and she had no umbrella and no raincoat and no hat.

"You'll be wet," I said.

She didn't speak, but her eyes looked, I fancied, as if she were glad to see me. If she had set out in that green powder of hers, it had all washed off.

I thought she might be carrying something, but she wasn't, not even a handbag.

"Come in," I said.

Those staying in the house were lent a key (with a deposit to pay on it), and, thank God, we got through the hall and up the stairs without meeting anyone, or hearing anything out of the way, even though my room was at the top of the building.

She sat down on my bed and looked at the door. After what had been said, I knew what to do and turned the key. It came quite naturally. It was the sort of place where you turned the key as a matter of course. I took off my raincoat and let it lie in a corner. I had not turned on the light. I was not proud of my room.

"You must be soaked through," I said. The distance from the fairground was not all that great, but the rain was of the specially wetting kind, as I've remarked.

She got up and took off her outsize black jacket. She stood there holding it until I took it and hung it on the door. I can't say it actually dripped, but it was saturated, and I could see a wet patch on the eiderdown where she had been sitting. She had still not spoken a word. I had to admit that there seemed to have been no call for her to do so.

The rain had soaked through to her white blouse. Even with almost no light in the room I could see that. The shoulders were sodden and clinging to her, one more than the other. Without the jacket, the blouse looked quainter than ever. Not only was it loose and shapeless, but it had sleeves that were so long as to droop down beyond her hands when her jacket was off. In my mind I had a glimpse of the sort of woman the blouse was made for, big and stout, not my type at all.

"Better take that off too," I said, though I don't now know how I got the words out. I imagine that instinct looks after you even the first time, provided it is given a chance. Madonna did give me a chance, or I felt that she did. Life was sweeter for a minute or two than I had ever thought possible.

Without a word, she took off her blouse and I hung it over the back of the single bedroom chair.

I had seen in the café that under it she had been wearing something black, but I had not realized until now that it was the same tight, shiny sheath that she wore in the show, and that made her look so French.

She took off her wet skirt. The best I could do was to drape it over the seat of the chair. And there she was, super high heels and all. She looked ready to go on stage right away, but that I found rather disappointing.

She stood waiting, as if for me to tell her what to do.

I could see that the black sheath was soaking wet, anyway in patches, but this time I didn't dare to suggest that she take it off.

At last Madonna opened her mouth. "What would you like me to begin with?"

Her voice was so beautiful, and the question she asked so tempting, that something got hold of me and, before I could stop myself, I had put my arms round her. I had never done anything like it before in my whole life, whatever I might have felt.

She made no movement, so that I supposed at once I had done the wrong thing. After all, it was scarcely surprising, considering how inexperienced I was.

But I thought too that something else was wrong. As I say, I wasn't exactly accustomed to the feel of a half-naked woman, and I myself was still more or less fully dressed, but all the same I thought at once that the feel of her was disappointing. It came as a bit of a shock. Quite a bad one, in fact. As often, when facts replace fancies. Suddenly it had all become rather like a nightmare.

I stepped back.

"I'm sorry," I said.

She smiled in her same sweet way. "I don't mind," she said.

It was nice of her, but I no longer felt quite the same about her. You know how, at the best, a tiny thing can make all the difference in your feeling about a woman, and I was far from sure that this thing was tiny at all. What I was wondering was whether I wasn't proving not to be properly equipped for life. I had been called backward before now, and perhaps here was the reason.

Then I realized that it might all be something to do with the act she put on, the swords. She might be some kind of freak, or possibly the man in the blue jersey did something funny to her, hypnotized her, in some way.

"Tell me what you'd like," she said, looking down at the scruffy bit of rug on the floor.

I was a fool, I thought, and merely showing my ignorance.

"Take that thing off," I replied. "It's wet. Get into bed. You'll be warmer there."

I began taking off my own clothes.

She did what I said, squirmed out of the black sheath, took her feet gently out of the sexy shoes, rolled off her long stockings. Before me for a moment was my first woman, even though I could hardly see her. I was still unable to face the idea of love by that single, dim electric light, which only made the draggled room look more draggled.

Obediently, Madonna climbed into my bed and I joined her there as quickly as I could.

Obediently, she did everything I asked, just as the man in the blue sweater had promised. To me she still felt queer and disappointing—flabby might almost be the word—and certainly quite different from what I had always fancied a woman's body would feel like if ever I found myself close enough to it. But she gave me my first experience none the less, the thing we're concerned with now. I will say one thing for her: from first to last she never spoke an unnecessary word. It's not always like that, of course.

But everything had gone wrong. For example, we had not even started by kissing. I had been cram full of romantic ideas about Madonna, but I felt that she was not being much help in that direction, for all her sweet and beautiful smiles and her soft voice and the gentle things she said. She was making herself almost too available, and not bringing out the best in me. It was as if I had simply acquired new information, however important, but without any exertion of my feelings. You often feel like that, of course, about one thing or another, but it seemed dreadful to feel it about this particular thing, especially when I had felt so differently about it only a little while before.

"Come on," I said to her. "Wake up."

It wasn't fair, but I was bitterly disappointed, and all the more because I couldn't properly make out why. I only felt that everything in my life might be at stake.

She moaned a little.

I heaved up from on top of her in the bed and threw back the bedclothes behind me. She lay there flat in front of me, all grey—anyway in the dim twilight. Even her hair was colourless, in fact pretty well invisible.

I did what I suppose was rather a wretched thing. I caught hold of her left arm by putting both my hands round her wrist, and tried to lug her up towards me, so that I could feel her thrown against me, and could cover her neck and front with kisses, if only she would make me want to. I suppose I might under any circumstances have hurt her by dragging at her like that, and that I shouldn't have done it. Still no one could have said it was very terrible. It was quite a usual sort of thing to do, I should say.

But what actually happened was very terrible indeed. So simple and so terrible that people won't always believe me. I gave this great, bad-tempered, disappointed pull at Madonna. She came up towards me and then fell back again with a sort of wail. I was still holding on to her hand and wrist with my two hands, and it took me quite some time to realize what had happened. What had happened was that I had pulled her left hand and wrist right off.

On the instant, she twisted out of the bed and began to wriggle back into her clothes. I was aware that even in the almost nonexistent light she was somehow managing to move very swiftly. I had a frightful sensation of her beating round in my room with only one hand, and wondered in terror how she could possibly manage. All the time, she was weeping to herself, or wailing might be the word. The noise she made was very soft, so soft that but for what was happening, I might have thought it was inside my own head.

I got my feet on to the floor with the notion of turning on the light. The only switch was of course by the door. I had the idea that with some light on the scene, there might be certain explanations. But I found that I couldn't get to the switch. In the first place, I couldn't bear the thought of touching Madonna, even accidentally. In the second place, I discovered that my legs would go no farther. I was too utterly scared to move at all. Scared,

repelled, and that mixed-up something else connected with disappointed sex for which there is no exact word.

So I just sat there, on the edge of the bed, while Madonna got back into her things, crying all the while, in that awful, heart-breaking way which I shall never forget. Not that it went on for long. As I've said, Madonna was amazingly quick. I couldn't think of anything to say or do. Especially with so little time for it.

When she had put on her clothes, she made a single appallingly significant snatch in my direction, caught something up, almost as if she, at least, could see in the dark. Then she had unlocked the door and bolted.

She had left the door flapping open off the dark landing (we had time-switches, of course), and I could hear her pat-patting down the staircase, and so easily and quietly through the front door that you might have thought she lived in the place. It was still a little too early for the regulars to be much in evidence.

What I felt now was physically sick. But I had the use of my legs once more. I got off the bed, shut and locked the door, and turned on the light.

There was nothing in particular to be seen. Nothing but my own clothes lying about, my sodden-looking raincoat in the corner, and the upheaved bed. The bed looked as if some huge monster had risen through it, but nowhere in the room was there blood. It was all just like the swords.

As I thought about it, and about what I had done, I suddenly vomited. They were not rooms with hot and cold running water, and I half-filled the old-fashioned washbowl, with its faded flowers at the bottom and big thumbnail chippings round the rim, before I had finished.

I lay down on the crumpled bed, too fagged to empty the basin, to put out the light, even to draw something over me, though I was still naked and the night getting colder.

I heard the usual sounds beginning on the stairs and in the other rooms. Then, there was an unexpected, businesslike rapping at my own door.

It was not the sort of house where it was much use first asking who was there. I got to my feet again, this time frozen stiff, and, not having a dressing-gown with me, put on my wet raincoat, as I had to put on something and get the door open, or there would be more knocking, and then complaints, which could be most unpleasant.

It was the chap in the blue sweater; the seaman or showman or whatever he was. Somehow I had known it might be.

I can't have looked up to much, as I stood there shaking, in only the wet raincoat, especially as all the time you could hear people yelling and beating it up generally in the other rooms. And of course I hadn't the slightest idea what line the chap might choose to take.

I needn't have worried. Not at least about that.

"Show pass off all right?" was all he asked; and looking straight into the distance as if he were on his platform, not at anyone or anything in particular, but sounding quite friendly notwithstanding, provided everyone responded in the right kind of way.

"I think so," I replied.

I daresay I didn't appear very cordial, but he seemed not to mind much.

"In that case, could I have the fee? I'm sorry to disturb your beauty sleep, but we're moving on early."

I had not known in what way I should be expected to pay, so had carefully got the ten pounds into a pile, Mr Edis's fiver and five single pounds of my own, and put it into the corner of a drawer, before I had gone out into the rain to meet Madonna.

I gave it to him.

"Thanks," he said, counting it, and putting it into his trousers pocket. I noticed that even his trousers seemed to be seaman's trousers, now that I

could see them close to, with him standing just in front of me. "Everything all right then?"

"I think so," I said again. I was taking care not to commit myself too far in any direction I could think of.

I saw that now he was looking at me, his small eyes deep-sunk.

At that exact moment, there was a wild shriek from one of the floors below. It was about the loudest human cry I had heard until then, even in one of those lodgings.

But the man took no notice.

"All right then," he said.

For some reason, he hesitated a moment, then he held out his hand. I took it. He was very strong, but there was nothing else remarkable about his hand.

"We'll meet again," he said. "Don't worry."

Then he turned away and pressed the black time-switch for the staircase light. I did not stop to watch him go. I was sick and freezing.

And so far, despite what he said, our paths have not recrossed.

Meeting Mr. Millar (1972)

Before it is too late, I set out the events exactly as I recall them.

I seem to recall them very well, and they were not of a kind easily forgotten; but amnesia is, I know, more likely to play a part in my tale than exaggeration. As a matter of policy, I am determined to damp down, to play down, to pipe down. I am a man of the twentieth century as much as anyone else.

Of course when it comes to carrying conviction, I make a bad start by being an author. "After all, he is an author!" I remember my grandmother saying when I anxiously questioned her about a particularly improbable tale Maurice Hewlett had told at her tea party that afternoon. I daresay it is precisely because I have sometimes made small sums of money with my pen that I have not related before now this story that is true.

And really with my pen. With this *very* pen in fact; and I was using the same pen when a year or two after the war (the real war—the first one), I took up my abode at the top of a house in Brandenburg Square. Fountain pens could then be had that were designed, positively, to last at least one lifetime.

I have faintly disguised the address because it is potentially libellous to designate a named house as haunted. I believe mine to be the narrative of a haunted man rather than of a haunted house, but after so many lawsuits, albeit mostly successful, I wish to avoid even a remote risk of another one.

I had the run of three small, dusty rooms, sketchily furnished, on the third floor. Hot in summer, cold in winter, they had been intended for servants' bedrooms. In one of them had lately been installed some inexpensive cooking and washing-up apparatus. In a former cupboard or glory-hole had been lodged an equally inexpensive bath and water-closet; to both of which the supply of water percolated but irregularly.

My father had been killed. My mother had almost no resources beyond the consequent pension. I was an only child and knew myself open to criticism for not taking a job, living at home, and handing over the proceeds. But my mother never did criticize, and I believed that I could at least make enough to pay my small rent and maintain *myself*. I was remarkably sanguine, but so, in the event, it worked out. I was never once in arrears, and never once reduced to living for a week or a month or a year on nothing but bread and margarine, as have been so many poets. That was partly, of course, because I never set up to write poetry: the basic bread and butter of my income was provided by the odd employment of going over other people's pornographic manuscripts and turning them into saleable books. As pornography is no longer as badly thought of as it was, I can mention that this work was given me by a man named Major Valentine. In any case, he is now dead; though I maintained touch with him almost until the end, partly because I was grateful to him for having kept me alive and enabled me to go my own way during such a critical period.

Major Valentine had been a comrade of my father's in the trenches. I first met him when he came to visit my mother after it was all over. He turned up one day, still in a "trench coat", and in the course of conversation remarked that the war had changed many people's ideas about the sort of books they wanted to read, and that he was going to put his gratuity into setting up as a publisher. I was eighteen at the time and I was pretty certain that there was an unbridgeable gulf between the amount of a major's gratuity and the topless tower of phantom gold needed even by the wariest of publishers. I knew a little about it because already I was set upon being a writer myself, and took the current *Writers and Artist's Year Book* to bed with me nightly until my bloodstream had absorbed all it had to teach or hint at. But naturally I said nothing, because in those days boys did not venture to carp at mature men, let alone when the mature men were war heroes also; and I was rewarded by being offered an "editor's" job there and then, no doubt in part as tribute to my father's memory and my mother's obvious problems. The American term "editor" was not then commonly used in the context of publishing, and my father's friend was already displaying how modern he intended to be. Before the war he had been a free-lance journalist. He actually so described himself to me, possibly because he claimed also to have made a success of it, which is most uncommon.

I had been cheaply and indifferently educated in the formal sense, and against a stressful and impecunious home life. Fortunately for me, formal education counts little for most artists (and, according to my experience, less than is commonly supposed for most other people). Though I wanted "to write", I had little idea of how to earn money at it—and a complete mental blank, with unpleasant elements of panic, whenever I thought about trying to earn money at anything else. Valentine made it clear that he was not yet in a position to offer enough to maintain me; but I clutched with joy and relief at the proffered regularity of his pittance, explained myself to my mother that same evening (Major Valentine could not stay to supper, and it was just as well), and was set up within the month in Brandenburg Square.

Valentine was never in a position to pay me much more than he paid me at the outset; but I beavered soberly around, and wrote increasingly persuasive letters, so that other jobs came in, a usefully wide variety of them, perhaps, when I came to writing my own first novel.

Major Valentine's subsequent career may as well be disposed of now: pornography is *never*—I think I may say never—as lucrative as it seems likely to be (I refer to the pornography that is recognized as such), and within three or four years Valentine turned to schoolmastering and then went back to the army as an instructor. In the end, he married. It was rather late in life, by the usual standard: but he married a woman who was older than he was, none the less, and she seemed to make him very happy—or perhaps keep him so, as he always seemed a happy person by nature. I went to visit them on several occasions, and certainly Valentine was living in very much better style than ever before when I had known him. Moreover, he was now a lieutenant-colonel. I suppose he had taken up with the Territorials. He was even fortunate in the manner of his death, which was in a fishing incident, and, they said, instantaneous.

When I took possession of my Brandenburg Square attic, there were two tenants below me.

On the second floor was the office of a political weekly named *Freedom*. Though appearing in English, it seemed to be produced by a staff composed entirely of foreigners, some of whom appeared to have difficulty even with conventionalities about the weather or the staircase cleaning when I

chanced to run into them on their landing. A surprisingly large number and variety of them were encountered by me during the six months or so we were in the building together. I wondered how the paper could maintain them all, especially as it was hard to believe it had much sale among the general public. From time to time I used to extract copies from the waste sacks left out at night.

In the basement of the building lived a young man and woman of mildly intellectual aspect. At that time, however, the man worked in the local branch of a well-known provisions chain; and the woman had a part-time job with a credit bookmaker. These dispositions were consequent upon their having four children and, therefore, little margin.

Even the very smallest of the children, none the less, had reached some kind of age for schooling; and the young wife used to flit up to my attic in the afternoon for a cup of coffee and a talk after her return from the bookmaker's establishment and before her departure to collect the child.

At first, I was not too keen. I was scrupulous about her position as a married woman living in the same house. Moreover, her visits soon became more and more frequent, almost daily; while at the same time I noticed that she always refused to commit herself about the day following, which I thought vaguely sinister. I fancied I owed it to myself to object a little to being interrupted in the course of composition (or editorship). Needless to say, none of this reserve availed for much or for long. It was no more than the subjective initial slowness or protest of the youthful male, respectably reared. Soon I was looking forward to this woman's visits so much that my morning's work suffered noticeably; and regretting in an entirely different way her continuing refusal to say whether tomorrow she would be back. "I simply can't tell you," she would reply. "We must make the most of the present." But her putting it like that helped to make it difficult for me to do so. Her name was Maureen. The name of her husband was Gilbert. Once she asked me to visit their place after the evening meal, but it could hardly be expected to be a success. The husband just sat there, worn out after a hot day in the provisions shop, and reading the *New Statesman;* and two or three of the children were old enough to stay up and ask questions and fall about. We never tried it again, I think.

The ground and first floors of the building were originally unlet, but that could not be expected to continue for very long now that the country was getting back on to its feet again. All the doors on to the hall and staircase were kept locked, and Maureen used to complain that it made the house seem depressing. I told her that it made for peace and quiet, but I appreciated that peace and quiet were not what Maureen was principally looking for, despite the hullaballoo of four small children in a not very large flat. One day I observed her in conversation with the window cleaners who swilled away once a month at the outsides of the never opened sashes. Of course they were glad of a few words with a pretty housewife having time on her hands. "They say there's nothing inside but emptiness," Maureen told me later. I made no comment, but filled in by kissing her hair or something of the kind. Maureen had at that time rather droopy hair, possibly owing to lack of vitamins during the war; which she kept off her brow with a big tortoiseshell slide. Her brow was really beautiful, and so were her eyes. They had that gentle look of being unequal to life, which, as I later realized, always attracts me in a woman.

One night the numerous office staff of *Freedom* did not depart at the usual hour; and, as late as ten or eleven o'clock, looking over my banister, I saw them still heaving and rolling great packages on the landing below. They were being very quiet about it as far as conversation went: not at all like foreigners, one felt. Obviously, there was a crisis, but for that very reason I felt it unkind to probe. In bed, I was kept awake not merely by the stolid thumping downstairs but also by the likelihood that the crisis was one affecting the whole building and the harmless, neutral way of life we had all worked out within it. Conceivably it was my first clear apprehension of the truth that is the foundation of wisdom: the truth that change of its nature is for the worse, the little finger (or thick gripping thumb) of mortality's cold paw.

And, duly, the next day the builders moved in. They actually woke me up with their singing, whistling, jostling, rowing, and other customary noises. They were in for an endless three weeks (though nowadays it would be six or nine); and, as serious work became impossible, I moved back to my mother's cottage for a spell, my first of more than a night or two since I had gone to London. The day of my departure was the first time also, as I well

remember, that I kissed Maureen full and passionately on the lips. I had feared, if I may be honest, to commit myself so far: with Maureen's husband and children in permanent residence just below me, to say nothing of my own narrow circumstances. Now the break in my regime seemed to make it less of a commitment. It was not a very sympathetic way of seeing things perhaps, but the options are so greatly fewer than people like to think.

When I reached the cottage, I found it impossible to work in the little bedroom that was always reserved for me, as the gravel lane outside was being "metalled" and widened. Even in the small sitting-room facing the other way, the noise was disturbing, and I had to throw the *Daily Chronicle* over work sent me by Valentine, every time I heard my mother's step, which was frequently, as she was solicitous and would have liked to keep me with her. In the end, the rumbling, indecisive steamroller, the clanking tar-boiler, the roadmenders more loudly jocund than Michael Fairless, withdrew to agitate other households, to diminish the more distant hedgerow. "Do stop as long as you can," said my mother.

Maureen had told me, before I left, that our ground, first, and second floors had all been made the subject of a single new letting. She had a way of picking up such things. She did not know whether the *Freedom* people had been actually driven out. It was impossible to believe that the enterprise could have much future in any case; and, indeed, I never heard of it again after that late sad night of removal and retreat, nor saw a copy of the paper on any bookstall or barrow.

In the end, I went to London for the morning in order to prospect. The whole front of the house had had its woodwork repainted, partly in blue, partly in white; including my two small square attic windows that looked on to the street. The early nineteenth-century front door had been brightly blued, and, to the left of it, at shoulder-height on the whited jamb, was an unusually large brass plate: *Stallabrass, Hoskins and Cramp. Chartered Accountants*. The plate needed polishing, possibly because it had only just arrived from elsewhere.

It was the time of day when Maureen was working with her bookmaker. I let myself in and mounted towards my abode. The internal paintwork had been renewed from top to bottom, though rather roughly, as was to be

expected so soon after the war, and in crude colours. The staircase walls had been repapered in an assertive mid-green. There was even a mottled carpet, where before there had been dark lino and unravelling drugget. It occurred to me that the heterogeneous impression might be a consequence of drawing upon stock-ends sold off (in this moment of world historical renewal) at bargain prices. There was no one about, and all the doors were closed, and everything was silent. At least, and at last, the builders were out.

My own front door contained a letter-box, though no postman had in my time ever ascended to it, all our letters being left on a shaky shelf in the ground floor passage. Now I found a *billet-doux* marked "By Hand": the agents were upset because I had not been there to admit the decorators. Would I please call in at their office as soon as possible? I never did anything more about that and nor did the agents. The building belonged to a vague charitable foundation which supported a school for needy boys. The school had been moved out of London before my time and the offices of the foundation with it. I had not found the agents to be over-officious. It had been one of the attractions.

My rooms were filled with every kind of grit and dirt owing to the decorating activities outside. They looked almost uninhabitable. I had never thought of affording any kind of professional cleaner; nor, indeed, had I ever noticed such a person in the whole place, though I realized that someone must have brushed the stairs from time to time. Now I wondered whether I should not have to solicit Maureen, or at least Maureen's advice.

It would have to be postponed. I had seen enough to know that in other, more important respects, I could return. Upon a writer unsuccessful and successful also in the degree that I then was, work always waits and presses. I went back to my mother's cottage for another night or two. "You must have found your flat very dusty," said my mother. "You had better let me give it a good spring-clean."

She had not been there before and I was hesitant. But, fortunately, when the time came, she seemed quite to like the attic, despite the disconcerting approach, with all the new colours staring out, and all the doors still locked. I know that at least most of them were locked and not merely shut, because

my mother tried many of the handles, and in no uncertain way, which I on my own had not cared to do.

"How do you get on with the people in the basement?" asked my mother.

I told her in some suitable words.

"I'm glad the wife's taken to you. You need a woman around. I'm glad she's pretty too."

It was not until several days after I finally returned that I again saw Maureen. My habits were pretty mousey, and I do not think she had realized that I was there. For my part, I held back from taking the initiative. In the first place, I had never done so hitherto. In the second place, I was more uncertain than ever, after the spell of absence, how things were going to develop, or even how I wanted them to develop. Then, one morning within the first week, as in a column of burning fiery chariots, entered into possession Messrs Stallabrass, Hoskins and Cramp, with all their force, all their mechanism, all their archive. Their arrival was as confident, rowdy, and cheerful as the withdrawal of *Freedom* had been obscure and muted. On the instant the staircase was alive with short-haired, short-skirted girls running up and down as in Jacob's dream, except that these girls were exchanging backchat with shouting removal men. (Short hair and short skirts were, of course, new at that date, though my mother had already gone in for both, even though she rarely travelled far from her cottage.) Moving through the throng were several men in white shirts, stiff collars, dark trousers, and braces. Could they be partners? Even Stallabrass, Hoskins and Cramp in person? Certainly they were going through motions which might well be a form of giving orders. The total number of persons involved quite eclipsed *Freedom*, even relatively. And that afternoon came Maureen tapping at my door.

"Why didn't you let me know you were back?"

"I hesitated."

She was willing to let it go at that.

"What do you think?" I went on, inclining my head downwards and sideways.

Maureen twitched up a corner of her mouth.

"Do you suppose they'll quieten down?" I asked.

"I don't see why they should. They're a pretty awful lot from what little I've seen."

"I've seen quite enough of them already." Authors always tend to be hasty in their judgments. It is the strain of searching for peace and concentration.

"Have you seen Mr Millar?"

"Not that I know of. Who's Mr Millar?"

"He's the man whose outfit it really is. The names outside don't exist, or are all dead, or something. My guess is that Mr Millar's bumped them all off."

I remember Maureen using that exact expression, which was then as new as short hair and short skirts.

"Not necessarily," I said. "You often find these firms with lots of names and none of the people really existing."

"You haven't seen Mr Millar," replied Maureen.

"Not that I know of. There seemed to be about a hundred of them. Is there anything special about Mr Millar's appearance?"

"Yes," said Maureen. "He looks like Cordoba the Sex Vampire." This, I should observe, was a silent film that made a mark at the time, though I was a little surprised to find Maureen citing it.

"Then you'd better rub yourself all over with garlic before you go to bed," I replied; and this helped to make things go more easily between Maureen and me after our separation.

I cannot say that Maureen's description of our new neighbour even stimulated my curiosity. As will have been gathered by now, I was an anxious and cautious youth, walking his own tight-rope, and rather afraid than otherwise of new company, of becoming involved. Possibly the frightful stuff that Major Valentine sent up to me contributed to my social timidity. I am sure I thought that the longer I could keep entirely out of contact with Maureen's Mr Millar, the better. I had very little idea of "gathering experience", and never doubted that I could spin books from inside me. For me the matter did not even need thinking about.

It was bad enough that the new tenants were all over the stairs and landings, with endless giggling, shouting, and banging of doors. Even during the first two or three days I noticed that they had a way of banging ordinary room doors several times in succession, as people do nowadays to doors of motor cars. None of it was at all the way I had supposed chartered accountants to behave.

"I wonder how they get any work done at all," Maureen was soon exclaiming. It was indeed on the next occasion I saw her.

I agreed with her: being one who needed complete silence and total absence of distraction before I could work at all. Or so I then thought. Indeed, I elaborated a little to Maureen.

"It's different for you," Maureen observed amiably. One of Maureen's many good points had always been her apparently sincere respect for an artist. It is probably grudging of me to term it "apparently sincere", but it is a thing one never really knows.

"You're welcome to use our living room at any time," Maureen continued.

"Thank you very much."

"If Mr Millar makes himself at home there, I don't see why you shouldn't. I like you much better," Maureen added coquettishly.

"Mr Millar! How did he get in?"

"He rang our bell the afternoon he arrived. The day I told you about him. You'll find he does the same to you soon. I rather fancy it's the way he goes about things."

"But what does he do in your flat?" I enquired feebly. I was astounded by what Maureen had said. The new people had been with us for only a few days.

"He lies down. In a darkened room, as he puts it. Though, as a matter of fact, our flat's not at all easy to darken properly. I once tried. Mr Millar says that he has to have what he calls intermissions. You can see what he means when you think about the din they all make."

"They're his staff, after all. Why can't he make them shut up?"

"I can't tell you, Roy."

"But what are *you* doing when he's there?"

"So far I've not been there. After all, it's only happened about three times. I suppose I can always keep the kids in the kitchen or put them in their bedroom."

"You'd better charge him something," I said sourly.

"Are you jealous, Roy?" asked Maureen.

"Yes," I said; though it was not entirely the truth.

"Oh, good," said Maureen. "We progress."

I had to admit to myself that I had probably invited remarks of that kind.

I had also to admit that, in the matter of meeting Mr Millar, to general distaste had now been added specific embarrassment.

I began to be upset by another irritating habit: the people downstairs had a way of letting their telephones (undoubtedly several of them—commoner now than then) ring and ring and ring before lifting the receiver. As they

almost always left all their doors open, the trick contributed greatly to the distant uproar that ascended to my attic.

Sometimes I could not but overhear one end of these delayed telephone conversations; when I was passing through the house, I mean: I do not imply that actual definable words penetrated my floor or walls.

Whatever I did hear was always of unbelievable commonplaceness or banality. It never seemed to be business in any sense; only a flow of vapourings, mixed with giggles. It is obvious that I judged with prejudice, but, as time passed, and I heard more and more of these vapid utterances, and never anything else, prejudice began to be mixed with a certain wonder, and then with a certain concern. Yes, I am almost sure that it was these overheard inanities, in no way my business and not even overheard all that frequently, because I passed through the house during business hours as rarely as I could, that *first* made me feel disturbed . . . feel that about the new tenants was something that as well as continually irritating me also frightened me. I had, of course, come upon jokes about typists talking on the telephone to their boy friends, but here was something that seemed to go much further. I think I might put it that a conversation as reasonable as a chat with a boy friend would have been positively welcome to my long ears, and explicable. Everything I heard or overheard was merely *empty*. For that reason nothing of it can be remembered. I doubt if I could have written down immediately what I had just heard as I climbed up to my third floor. Apart from anything else, I should have been *ashamed* to harbour such futilities in my thoughts or memory.

When I met them in the hall or on the stairs, the little girls leered at me forthcomingly, or smirked at me contemptuously, or sometimes manifested real hostility. Some of these words seem absurd; but they describe how the girls made me feel. All of them were very young. Many people would say that the fault must have been largely mine. No doubt in a sense it was. I admit that I could find no way of dealing with the girls. Conventional greetings seemed absurd. Moreover, the girls were always new: I suppose there might have been five or six working there (if that was the word) at a time, but faces that I had come to know soon disappeared, and were apparently replaced by complete strangers. It was not possible to think in

terms of getting to know individuals; even if that had been what I wanted to do.

As for the men in the firm, who did not change (and were, needless to say, older), the custom was to stare me up and down, while, perhaps, I descended the stair or came in through the front door; to stare me up and down as if I were a stranger and an intruder off the street; and then sometimes, but not always, though always at the last moment, to utter an over-bland Good Morning or Good Evening.

The men never seemed to be fully dressed. Their clothes were always formal, the garments of the properly dressed professional man, but never (when I observed them) did the men seem to have them all on. It was always as if they were frightfully busy, or much too hot: even in winter, though, there, it is true that the offices were remarkably well heated. I would hardly have gazed in at the gas stoves or whatever they were, but from every open door, it might be in December or January, would come a positive and noticeable wave of hot air as one passed. The girls would wear summery dresses even in winter and then, necessarily, depart in heavy coats. But, of course, most people prefer to live and work in great heat; and I do not. I have to add that while the men always performed as if they were weighed down with work, I have no more recollection of seeing them doing any than I have in the case of the girls. But possibly I was and am influenced here by my own personal inability to work in an uproar. I did not know the names of the men (or, of course, of the girls); and though the girls chattered on through the open doors and all around me as if I were not present or were invisible, the shirt-sleeved men tended in the opposite direction, to fall silent and stand motionless until I had altogether passed and was out of earshot. Nor, now I come to think of it, did I notice any of the usual office horseplay between the men and the girls; though most of the girls might have been thought ready enough for it.

And then there was the mystery of the firm's clients. The mystery was that one never seemed to see one: only the internal staff seething up and down.

"Have you ever seen any?" I asked Maureen.

"Mr Millar says there are a lot of people who've been with them a long time."

"I wouldn't care to be among them."

"How can we tell?" responded Maureen vaguely.

I noticed that Maureen had ceased asking me whether I had met Mr Millar.

I suppose the number of letters arriving each morning might have given some idea of how much genuine business there was. But here I was at a disadvantage. Authors are not normally early risers. In the old days I had put on my dressing gown (quite faded and stained-even torn, I believe) and descended to the shelf in the hall without giving a thought to what the *Freedom* people might think about me, numerous though they were (as I then considered). Now it seemed quite impossible: partly because of the girls, of course, but not entirely. So my slender morning post, even the ill-made packages from Major Valentine, had to await my being shaved and fully dressed; and by then any post there might have been for the people below had been long "taken in", as the expression is. This was all the more unavoidable in that usually I made my simple breakfast before shaving and dressing, and could see no reason why I should change my ways because of Mr Millar and his merry men. But I think also that I had very little *wish* to know more of what went on below me. I have just spoken of "genuine" business. I found it hard to believe there was much of it, though I could not even surmise what went on all the rest of the time. It is true that I found odd letters for the firm at other times of the day: almost all of them impersonal emanations on his Majesty's service. They did, I realized, suggest there might be *some* accountancy in hand. I recollected an uncle of my mother's once observing that figures, my boy, are only a very small part of what a successful accountant does. And, indeed, I still do not know what did go on in that office. I have related my impressions as clearly as I can; but new developments began to seem of more importance.

I think it must have been at least a month before I even set eyes upon Mr Millar. For obscure reasons, Maureen and I had altogether ceased referring to him. Then, all at once, I not only saw him but had to talk to him, with very little warning or preparation; and *à deux*.

One Friday, in the late afternoon, at half past five perhaps, my own rather noisy doorbell suddenly rang. I say "suddenly" because I had heard no steps coming up my staircase, which remained uncarpeted. Swearing, I threw my raincoat over the current material from Valentine, and went to see who it was. A man stood there.

"I'm Millar." But he did not offer to shake hands, as one usually did in those days, and his eyes wandered about, never once looking into mine, but not, as I thought, examining my humble environment either. "Won't you come in for a drink?" he said. "Just on the floor below. And of course bring anyone with you."

I need hardly say I did not want to, but I could think of no way to refuse, and it would be no doubt unwise to make an enemy. So I got out something affirmative.

"Come when you're ready. Second floor."

It seemed a slightly odd way of putting it; but, for that matter, it was perfectly obvious that there was no one "with me", not even a girl pushed into a cupboard. Without another word, Mr Millar descended. I saw that he was wearing beige suède shoes, doubtless with crêpe rubber soles. And of course he was in his braces, like the rest of them.

I was glad to have a few minutes for rehabilitation. One does not wear one's best clothes for editing a pornographic manuscript alone in an attic; and also I had in those days a habit of unconsciously running my right hand (I am left-handed) through my hair as I wrote, wrecking whatever parting there might have been, and making myself look like the picture in the German book for children, my hair being then unusually thick and wiry. I changed my shirt, put on my old school tie (such as it was), and tried my luck with the comb.

Then, striving to think about nothing, I plunged through the door on the second floor landing. I had been in there several times during the *Freedom* period, but everything was now very different. The walls of the outer room had been newly papered in pink with a cornice of flowers, and were decorated with what appeared to be small English landscape paintings,

probably by an amateur, and framed in nothing more permanent than *passe-partout*. There were a surprising number of them, not all exactly on a level from the floor. In the middle of the room was a desk, obviously new; but with nothing on it, not even a cloaked typewriter, or a rubber-out. Also I was alone. But the door into the further room was ajar. I went up to it. "Anyone at home?" I said.

Mr Millar drew the door fully open. "Come in," he said, still neither looking me in the eye nor offering his hand. Also he was still without his jacket.

"No one with you?" He seemed disappointed, though, as I have said, it was absurd.

"No," I said. "Only me."

"Working?" He said it not in the way of apology for interrupting me, or even in the way of making conversation, but rather as if he referred to some unusual hobby he had heard I went in for.

"Yes. But it doesn't matter. I'm glad of a break." That, of course, was not the exact truth.

"Sherry?"

The bottle indicated that it came from one of the colonies, and the three glasses on Mr Millar's desk were from the threepenny and sixpenny store. One is not supposed to say such things so plainly, but on this occasion I think they are of significance. Conclusive perhaps was that the bottle had to be opened, and some small shavings or chippings brushed out of two glasses with the back of a carbon paper, before they could be used. It seemed clear that the feast had been assembled especially for me.

"Thank you very much."

It was not a matter of an alternative to sherry. Obviously there was none.

Mr Millar fumbled away with a not very good corkscrew; one (as I knew even then) with too small a radius to the screw and too slender and cutting a

handle. I almost felt that I should offer to help. I was quite sure that at least I should say something, as time was passing in silence while the cork split off and refused to come out; but I could think of nothing to the purpose.

I had not been offered a seat, though there were two new office chairs, as well as the one behind Mr Millar's equally new desk. Mr Millar's desk was in imitation mahogany, where the desk outside imitated some much lighter and yellower wood. The sanctum was papered in light purple, or perhaps deep mauve: I can see it now, even though I never saw it again after this one visit, and quite a brief visit too, as will be seen. There was also some purple stuff on the centre part of the floor, where the desk stood; though the purple was not the same. There were four or five old portraits of the kind one can buy twice a week at certain auction-rooms. Normally such portraits are genuinely ancient, but of limited artistic value. They are like the "old books" which so many people believe to be of great value but which, though quite truly old, prove almost impossible to sell at all in the hour of need. These specimens were of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century gentry in lace and wigs, four men and one woman; and they were in battered, discoloured frames. The one woman was elderly and unexceptional. Somehow it could not occur to one that these could be likenesses of Mr Millar's own ancestors.

"Pity there was no one with you," said Mr Millar, pouring out. He fished out from one glass a scrap of tinfoil dropped off the bottle. That was quite a job too, as only a paperknife was available to do it.

"My home is not in London," I said. "I don't know many people here yet."

Mr Millar seemed uninterested, and one could hardly blame him.

"I wonder how long Lloyd George will last?"

This was, almost aggressively, "making conversation. Plainly I had failed badly in having no one with me. But at last the glass of sherry had reached me. As I was still not offered a seat, I sat down on one for myself. Immediately Mr Millar sat down also. I could think of nothing intelligent to say about Lloyd George, but I suppose I said something.

"Santé!" said Mr Millar, still not looking at me—or at anything else, as it seemed to me. He was like a man with two glass eyes. I took a strong pull at the sherry glass, fortunately quite large.

"Thundery weather," said Mr Millar. "How long before it breaks?"

"Not just yet I should say."

"You're a countryman?"

"More an outer suburban, I'm afraid. At least it's become that."

"Rather good sherry, don't you think?"

"Frightfully good."

"Do you take the *Post* or the *Telegraph*?"

"I take The *Times*."

"Bit young for that, aren't you?"

"I grew up with it."

"Really?"

"Never another paper in our house."

"Good Lord! You'd better write and tell them so." Mr Millar laughed metallically.

It seemed that there was positively nothing to me without that missing person "with me". Really we could hardly continue.

"Let me fill you up." He said it as perfunctorily as he had said everything else; but I accepted with some relief. I much needed daredevilry. I could hardly escape for a few more minutes.

I could think of nothing to say which would continue the conversation. I doubted very much whether anything I could possibly say, would continue it. The central fact about Mr Millar was that his thoughts were elsewhere: were, I felt all the time I was with him, elsewhere permanently. His glass eyes and wandering hands spoke truth of a kind, where his lips spoke only cotton wool.

"Fancy anything for the Cambridgeshire?"

I could but shake my head. From one point of view, I could see that Mr Millar might hope for more lively company.

"What about the tennis this summer? Good to have it back, don't you think?"

"Good to have a lot of things back."

"But there's a lot that won't come back so soon."

"Yes," I said. "That's true."

"I shouldn't wonder if there's never proper polo to watch again. Not polo worth watching."

He was sitting sideways at his desk, showing me his left profile. I have said little—indeed, as I see, virtually nothing—about Mr Millar's appearance. Perhaps it is because there is so little to say. As far as I recall, he was a slender, dark man of medium height. He was cleanshaven, always a trifle black in the jowl—but only a trifle. I suppose he was 40; maybe a well-preserved 50. He had a wad of blackish hair, carefully trimmed round the edges, so that it seemed to fit his head like a cap, and always honeyed with brilliantine. He was at all times well dressed; at all times noticeably so, but not in a pejorative sense, except, conceivably, for such details as the suède shoes I have mentioned (he was wearing a townsman's country suit with them, it being the eve of the weekend). His counterparts are to be seen everywhere, at all times . . .

I think I might even say that Mr Millar belonged to a *type* whose members tend to make one feel that their thoughts are elsewhere. But few of them carry this impression as far as Mr Millar carried it. Even at that first (but almost only) meeting, I sensed that Mr Millar's thoughts were as far away as those of Boris Godunov, who had, some said, made away with the rightful heir; or even of our own misled Macbeth.

"While you're here," said Mr Millar, "there's something I'd like to explain. It seems a good opportunity."

"Oh yes," I said, slanting my sherry glass, now once more less than half full.

"We're very busy just now. I often have to stay on. So don't be surprised if you hear sounds."

"I'm glad you've mentioned it."

"I didn't want you to think we'd got the burglars in." Mr Millar laughed his metallic laugh. "I supposed at first I could come to an arrangement with the girl in the basement. Rather a sweet person, don't you think?"

"From what I've seen of her," I said.

"But of course she has her family to think about and all that sort of thing. So I've decided to shake down up here. After all, why not?" Mr Millar's colourless eyes roamed uneasily round the room, almost, it seemed, as if he thought his question might be answered. His gaze then proceeded to traverse the ceiling. To me his news was so unwelcome that again I could find nothing whatever to say.

"You're one of these famous authors, I'm told?"

"I aim to be," I replied.

"I once thought I'd write a book myself."

"Had you a subject in mind?" I enquired without a trace of sarcasm.

"I'm sure I had," said Mr Millar. "God knows what it was!" He laughed again. "Let me fill you up."

"I really ought to be on my way."

"Just one more before you go," said Mr Millar, making a discernibly minimal effort to retain me. He was waving the bottle about nervously, but managed to concentrate enough to refill my glass.

"Yes, a sweet little person that!"

I smiled as man to man; or rather that was how it would have been if both of us had been men, instead of one of us an adolescent and the other a simulacrum.

"Man was not meant to live alone. Don't you agree?"

"There are arguments on both sides," I replied.

"You wait till you're older," said Mr Millar, and laughed his laugh. "You can't talk till then."

"I live a long way away, you know," he continued. "I couldn't possibly go home every night when we're so infernally busy. Couldn't stand the fag of it."

"I suppose it's a good thing accountancy's so prosperous." But I was quite surprised that Mr Millar claimed to have a "home", however distant.

"Yes, I suppose it is if you care to see it like that."

I rose. "Anyway, I must leave you to it."

"Glad you were able to come."

He saw me only to the door of his sanctum; then turned back, his mind concentrated upon someone or something else, one shrank from thinking what.

From then on, as I might have known, Mr Millar seemed to remain in his office almost every night. The rest of them disappeared at more or less the usual hour, but Mr Millar would continue pottering up and down stairs, locking and unlocking doors, carting small objects from place to place, making and answering late telephone calls, sometimes talking to himself as he roamed. When his shuffling about stopped me working (which, I have to acknowledge, was only occasionally), I would quietly open my door and shamelessly eavesdrop down my dark stair. But Mr Millar's activities seemed so trivial and futile as to be hardly worth spying on for long, and the chatter he addressed to himself (quite loudly and clearly) was not so much obsessive as escapist. The burden of his thoughts had long ago driven him out of his own personality, even when he was by himself. He had become a walking shell from which the babble of the world re-echoed.

Did he ever really sleep? And, if so, on what? His sanctum had offered nothing but the floor when I had been in it; but, as I have said, I never entered it again. I suppose a sofa could have been introduced without my meeting it coming upstairs or hearing it bruise the new paintwork. I did not know whether Mr Millar locked his door, the outer one or the inner one, when finally he ceased to travail on the staircase and from room to room. Assuredly, I never heard him snore through the ceiling; although his bleak sanctum was immediately below my bedroom. But snoring is always absurd, and absurd was never quite the word for Mr Millar.

That was how it was in the early days of Mr Millar's virtual residence beneath me. (I often wondered about the terms of his lease. It was as well that the agents we had to deal with were so easy-going.) But before long Mr Millar began to receive visitors.

I had observed that rather late in the evening he seemed often to be out of the building. I would wander downstairs for some reason, or come back from the gallery of a theatre or the front rows of a cinema (my mother warned me about the effect on my eyesight). At any time between, perhaps, nine o'clock and two o'clock, I would find the lights on, and some of the doors still open, but no sight or sound of Mr Millar. I supposed that even he had had to seek a bite of food. I never looked into any of the open rooms, because I feared that Mr Millar would spring from behind the door, cry

Peep-bo, and do me a hideous mischief; but I think I was right in supposing him out of the office at these times, and this was confirmed when he got into the way of not returning alone.

Normally I only heard voices; voices and trudging steps, coming up the stairs, often very slowly, and then interminable talk on the floor below me, though sometimes there were other noises less easily definable, or explicable. More often than not, the voices were female; and, more often than not, very common voices, even strident, though I could seldom hear precise words. Up to a point the explanation was obvious enough: in those days, and before Mr R. A. Butler's famous Act, there were streets in the immediate area where it was far easier to pick up a woman and do what you liked to her than to pick up a taxi. On other evenings, Mr Millar's late callers were men, and several of them at a time, and as rough-spoken as the women. But the women also usually came several at a time: several at a time and apparently all friends together.

I really had no will to investigate closely: Mr Millar both bored me and alarmed me, in oddly equal measure. But the noise that he and the late callers made together was sometimes a serious nuisance, though the things I have described did not happen every night.

An unfortunate development was that I felt inhibited from bringing in my own few friends, especially my few but precious girl friends. One never quite knew what would happen, and explanations were at once ridiculous, unconvincing, and sinister. It was impossible to devise even an invented explanation that meant anything. A very young man who can bring no one home is at a major disadvantage. I found myself spending far longer periods as a hermit than I cared for. I perceived that I was being handicapped by circumstances even more than by temperament in making new approaches. Moreover, Mr Millar had not only altered the atmosphere in the house, but had already brought about an indefinable change in me.

It first struck me in the matter of Maureen. Maureen had ceased to visit me, and when we met by chance, we were strangers. We stared into one another's eyes coldly, as if divided by incommunicable experiences. What horrified me, when I thought about it, was that I realized I did not care. And I had previously become far fonder of Maureen than I had ever been able to

make real to her. Nor was it that another had taken her place. Far from it. It had somehow diminished.

In the end, and inevitably, I met, or at least encountered some of Mr Millar's late visitors; on the doorstep, or surging upwards with Mr Millar in the midst, or, once or twice, standing silently on the staircase waiting for something to happen. It was especially odd to come upon these complete strangers standing about one's own staircase late at night. Never did they think of speaking to me; but then the persons actually accompanying Mr Millar, sometimes arm in arm with him, never spoke to me either, though often plainly embarrassed, even startled, to see me. Least of all at these times did Mr Millar himself speak to me. He kept his eyes away from me in his usual way; apprehending me and making way for me, drawing the others back, all as if with his pineal gland.

Mr Millar's callers looked as they sounded, only sometimes still rougher. Hogarthian groups can be entertaining in a picture but seem less so when encountered going the other way on a narrow stair. The men callers looked like small-size professional criminals; with violence taken for granted, and a bad end also. I noticed that the sexes were seldom mixed among Mr Millar's callers, though once I did encounter a very pregnant girl, horribly white, being dragged upstairs by a man with gashes all over his face. Men and women alike tended to become silent even among themselves when they saw me; and when I did catch things they said, the things were always banalities worthy of Mr Millar himself. Never was there any question of a "revelation". But then about Mr Millar, though everything was in a sense wide open, nothing was revealed from first to last.

An almost ludicrously flat explanation of the late callers occurred to me at one time. Was it not possible that these people, or some of them, really were clients; concerned with small enterprises, cafés for example, which, though doubtless shady, still needed to keep accounts of a kind, perhaps several sets of them (as my great-uncle would have said)? The people might have reasons for not calling during the daytime. They might even have good and honest reasons: the demands made by one-man and one-woman businesses. Thus, further, might be explained, or partly explained, Mr Millar's policy of sleeping in the office, and his claim that business required it. And indeed

that explanation may have been a true one as far as it went; whatever else may be said or surmised about the late callers. It struck me also, however, that at no time did I seem to see any other persons who could be thought of as friends of Mr Millar. One would suppose that these late callers *were* his friends; even his only friends. Certainly he treated them as friends: with uneasy shoves in the ribs, and sidelong jocularities, and teeth-flashing After-yous.

Looking back on it all, it seems to me that it slowly worked up. There appeared to be nothing stable about Mr Millar's life in any of its aspects: one doubted whether he slept regularly, ate regularly, ever saw the same friend twice; had any underlying framework of habit and routine. None the less, there was a perceptibly advancing intensification as the pageant of his life with us flowed on; at once ludicrous and alarming, as everything else about Mr Millar—and steadily more embarrassing for me, in every sense of that epithet.

Indeed, I suppose I should try to say a word about why I did not myself soon move out; or at least *seek* some other abode sooner than I did.

About this I could rationalize unanswerably. With truth I could say that three rooms at a low rent in central London were exceedingly hard to find, and that everyone I knew told me I was very lucky and should sit tight at all costs—not that any of them knew in the least what the costs were. I could stress how notional was my cash basis, so that almost any change, not absolutely compelled, would indeed on balance be almost certainly for the worse. I could point out that the inconvenience (or menace) linked with Mr Millar was by no means continuous. Even towards the end, or apparent end, of his sojourn, there would be several evenings in each week when there was no trouble at all except the marginal one connected with his own, solitary fumblings and mumblings. And then there was the important problem, one which I could never forget, presented by my mother's strong, though mainly silent, wish to have me back with her at the cottage. Any weakening on my part would probably lead to my giving up my London life completely, and the new friends I had made. They were few, but I felt that they were nearly a matter of life or death to me, even though Mr Millar was a problem there too.

All these things were entirely enough to settle the matter. But what really settled it was, I think, something quite different. It was as if Mr Millar had injected me with a lightly paralysing fluid, cocooned me in an almost indetectable glaze or fixative; diminishing my power of choice, weakening my rational judgment, to say nothing of the super-refinement that had been put upon it by the super-refinement of the way I had been brought up. Though, when I thought about it, I was antagonized by almost everything to do with Mr Millar, yet I realized that he was an experience (or ordeal) I might be unwise to avoid. I could not live for ever as a child, free and light as air. As we acquire weight in the world, we lose it within ourselves. Maturity is always in part a matter of emptying and contracting. By that standard, Mr Millar, almost weightless, almost adrift, almost without habits (where a baby has nothing else), had passed beyond mere maturity; but contact with him amounted to a compressed and simplified course in growing up. Mine was similar to the real reason why a schoolboy does not run away from the school he hates.

One evening—it was perhaps seven o'clock—came Maureen, once more tapping gently at my door.

"How are *you* getting on?" she asked. It was the first time in months that actual spoken words had passed between us; and never before had she been able to visit me except in the afternoon, between her job and collecting the youngest child.

She was wearing a short, sleeveless grey dress, with a scooped out neck: very little of it altogether in fact; and with several stains on the front, left there by cooking, or the children. She wore no stockings and a pair of high-heeled shoes that more or less matched her dress. She had left off her slide, and her hair was drooping over her eyes, so that she had to look up from under it. Her hands were in need of a wash, and there was even a small grimy patch on her face.

It was summer, and I was wearing simply a shirt and trousers.

I stepped up to her and held her tightly and kissed her as if it were for ever.

"Stranger!" said Maureen affectionately.

I took off her dress, quite gently; and then wriggled her out of her underclothes, which were charming.

We lay down together on my cheap bed, neither glamorous nor particularly comfortable.

"What about you?" asked Maureen.

So I removed my own clothes, which I had quite forgotten about; and I put her shoes neatly alongside one another.

We were together for three or four hours, until long after it was dark, listening to our hearts, and, intermittently, to the sounds of London.

I did not ask her about her husband and family, nor did she expound; and when suddenly she said, "I'm going now," my luck was in, or ours, because Mr Millar was not even walking from room to room with bits of paper in his hands, let alone entertaining the visitors. I should have hated Mr Millar to have seen me kissing Maureen goodbye.

"When can I see you again?"

"I simply can't tell you. We must make the best of the present." Talk about maturity! I still had far to go, and perhaps had even experienced a setback, a reversion to happy childhood.

I have said that the pageant (or mirage) of Mr Millar's life seemed steadily to work up, to intensify.

One thing that was a new embarrassment as far as I was concerned was that Mr Millar was drinking. The ludicrous side of it, if one saw it like that, was that large crates of cheap spirits were continually being delivered to the house by men in peaked caps. Remarkably often they rang my outside bell instead of the one appertaining to Messrs Stallabrass, Hoskins and Cramp. I would toil down, with all the men in their braces staring at me as if they had never seen me before, and all the girls giggling, and then have to toil up again; the booby who had fallen into the trap. (Mr Millar himself continued almost invisible during working hours, at least as far as I was concerned.

For a time I wondered whether he did not use the day for sleeping.) I have described the spirits that were ceaselessly delivered as "cheap": they were gins made by brewers, and whiskies not made in Scotland or in Ireland; both with jazzy labels on the bottles.

The alarming side of Mr Millar's new propensity was that now when I returned home, I would sometimes find him not wandering about, but sprawling or huddled on the staircase, very white and dishevelled, breathing hard, and once or twice with the pupils of his eyes unnaturally turned upwards. The stairs would smell of drink, sometimes the whole house, though I do not think I ever actually saw Mr Millar with a glass in his hand or a bottle (after that first uneasy party with him, of course). None the less, he must have been drinking heavily, if one might judge by the deliveries; and I began to fear worse consequences, such as delirium tremens, concerning which I felt the apprehension that arises from total ignorance. My great-uncle, again, had been terrifying on the subject without going much into detail, "while your mother's in the room", as he had said. Nor did the possibility of finding Mr Millar lying dead on the stairs rather than merely insensible at all attract me.

In the meantime, the aspect of the matter, not necessarily either funny or frightening, which none the less gave me the most trouble was that Mr Millar, instead of merely talking to himself, had begun to warble and carol, to bawl and bellow. He seemed capable of keeping it up, at least intermittently, for hours on end, as he fussed around.

When he was japing his late-night friends, the noise could be appalling. The urban sons of toil, even when the nature of their toil is probably criminal, are seldom slow in striking up, nor, traditionally, are the daughters of joy, who seemed to constitute the larger part of Mr Millar's acquaintanceship. Indeed, the police came ringing in protest: at *my* bell of course. And, on another occasion, banging and thumping at the outer door; a small posse of them, to judge by the sound; and by the stamping when once they had got in.

As far as I was concerned, there was occasionally another kind of interruption. I would hear hysterical shouting in the room below me and then steps running up my own uncarpeted stair. There would be frantic

pounding at my attic door, and when I opened it, a dishevelled girl too distraught to say what was the matter. I would glance over her shoulder as she stood there crying and raving and beating at me to let her in; and there would be Mr Millar at the bottom of the stair, comparatively calm, though not always entirely steady. He never spoke a word at these times, but seemed merely an uneasy spectator, collapsed against the banister. One might have thought him genuinely embarrassed and baffled by what had happened: resolved not to take the risk of saying a word when someone else was dealing with the situation.

In all the circumstances, I could not possibly admit the girl, so I would edge her downstairs again, saying that I would see her safely out into the street, and of course trying to buck her up, though I had no idea how best to do that. We would creep past Mr Millar, sometimes with my arm round the girl's shoulders; and he would never say a word of any kind, or make a move.

On one of these occasions, out of the four or five that I suppose there were in all, I was much frightened. It was bad enough to have to drag the girl past Mr Millar himself standing there watching; but on the occasion I refer to, when I reached the bottom of my stair, which ran straight up between two walls, I found that standing beside Mr Millar, and previously hidden from me, were two huge louts in cloth caps. They looked like chuckers-out or unsuccessful bruisers, but now they were as still and silent as Mr Millar. I did not find it easy to continue downwards with the shrinking girl at my other side, pressing herself against the wall; but I managed it and, as usual, nothing further happened. When I came up again after these incidents, Mr Millar had usually withdrawn into his room and shut the landing door. This time all three of them had disappeared. I expected some kind of rumpus to resound from below me; but none did.

On another occasion, I remember that the girl was of a different type from the usual: standing ashake on my dingy doorstep, she told me that she had met Mr Millar at Wimbledon, but, though she knew she had been a fool, she had no idea it would be like this. "I had no idea it *could* be," she said, her eyes boring into me. She very much wanted me to telephone the police but I thought it would solve nothing and end nothing. Moreover, I should have

had to borrow Mr Millar's telephone. So I just manoeuvred her out in the usual way, and in the street she recovered remarkably. "I'm most awfully sorry to have been so silly," she said. Then she added, "Curse it, I've left my coat behind and it's a new, summer one."

Going down for my post a day or two later, I found Mr Millar's male staff chucking a girl's coat from one to another in the big ground floor room; snatching at it and yelling at each other in mock antagonism. I supposed it was the same coat. I remember the colour still; a rather unusual greenish yellow, like yerba de maté.

Nor, very evidently, were lawn tennis and improvised office throwabouts and kickabouts (more usually with a waste-paper basket) the only sporting interests of the firm. Every day I noticed communications from bookmakers; and others with continental stamps that I identified as coming from operators of casino systems. (My great-uncle yet again, I fancy.) I suppose now that the bookmakers' letters can only have arrived during the racing season, and that I must tend to exaggerate their continuity. But I truly remember a very large number of them. I suppose there is a possible link between accountancy and the computation of odds; and even more, one would think, on the tables than on the turf. I came to modify my speculations about what Mr Millar did during the day: since he went to Wimbledon, he might well go to race meetings also, as well as on occasion simply sleeping.

Certainly there were sometimes "sporting types" about the building during the day. I do not refer here to the evening bashers and barrow boys, but to men in tweeds, with rolled umbrellas and public-school idioms. They would exchange loud badinage with the firm's staff, slap the bottoms of the girls (remarkably hard, I thought), and be gone in fast, popping cars almost as soon as they had come. One of them is associated with a development that was particularly upsetting; and thus with my decision to move out.

Up to a point, I could not mistake this particular man. The noise of his car was both doubly loud and very distinctive. I could always hear him approaching from afar. And when he had arrived, he immediately clumped upstairs with a quite particular firmness. He always climbed right up to Mr Millar's own second floor, and there, with clatter and circumstance, he

would open Mr Millar's outer door, using, apparently, a key on his own ring. He would go inside, be heard loudly tumbling things about for a minute or two, and then emerge, relock the door, and clump off again. The whole performance was regularly audible through my window, door, and floor; right through to the long withdrawing thunder of the man's machine.

Originally, I supposed that it was Mr Millar himself arriving and departing; Mr Millar who had left something behind, or wanted to see how things were getting on. But one day I met the stranger. His car roared up just as I was about to go out. In came a round, red-faced, stocky man in a green suit and a green pork-pie hat. He threw back the front door and gave me a really heavy push against the wall—in fact, seriously bruising my elbow, as I later found, so that for several days I had some difficulty in writing. Before I could say a word (if I could have thought of one) he was well upstairs with his familiar clump. I knew that from those around I could expect laughter rather than sympathy, so I continued on my way.

All the time I was in Brandenburg Square, I spent nearly every weekend with my mother. On the few occasions when I did not, but stayed up in London, either to complete some work or to spend time with a friend, I thought I had established that Mr Millar took himself off; as, of course, one would expect. I assumed that he withdrew to the home he had mentioned to me over the sherry; difficult though I had found it to imagine.

Some time (I cannot remember how long) after my direct encounter with the sporting man in the green suit came one of these London weekends. I think my mother had departed to stay with my father's stepsister in Frinton, as, since my father's death, she had grown into the way of doing several times each year. By now I had ceased inviting people round to see me even at these rare weekends, so disconcerting was the atmosphere in my house. And, at that particular weekend, it was possibly as well that I had.

Everything remained silent and as usual on the Saturday night, while I worked away on some rubbish from Major Valentine; but after I had gone to bed, quite late, I was awakened by the noise of somebody moving about downstairs.

Almost my first conscious thought was that the noise was nothing like loud enough to have actually awakened me. Then I remembered that it was a Saturday-Sunday night when there should (as I thought) have been no noise inside the building at all. I realized that my unconscious mind might have taken stock of this fact and sent out an alarm. I was frightened already, but that thought made me more frightened.

The noise was totally unlike the usual stamping and banging. I could hardly hear it at all; and was soon wondering whether the whole thing was not fancy, a disturbance inside my own ears and head. But I could not quite convince myself of this as I lay there rigid with listening, while the gleam from the street lamp far below seemed to isolate my small bedroom from the blackness of so much around me. I began to wonder if this might not be purely a conventional burglary. I could just see the time by my watch. It was ten minutes past three.

It was my duty to take action.

I made my muscles relax, and with a big effort jumped out of bed. In the most banal way, I seized the bedroom poker. (At that time, even central London attics still had fireplaces.) I opened the door into my sitting-room, darker than the bedroom, but not so dark that I could not cross with certitude to the outer door, where the light-switch was. Without turning on the light, I opened the outer door. I looked down my pitch-dark flight of stairs. When a light was on further down I could from this point always see the glow. Now there was no light.

I became aware that a smell was wafting up. It was quite faint, at least where I was, but, none the less, extremely pungent and penetrating. I must admit that the expression "a graveyard smell" leapt into my mind at the first whiff of it. Even a faint whiff was quite enough to make me feel sick in a moment. But I managed to hang on, even to listen with all the intentness I could muster.

There could be no doubt about the reality of the sounds beneath me; but every doubt about what caused them. Something or someone was shuffling and rubbing about in the almost total darkness: I found it impossible to decide on which landing or on which part of the staircase. In a flight of

rather absurd logic, the thought of a blind person came to me. But, truly, the sounds hardly seemed human at all: more like a heavy sack wearily dragging about on its own volition, not able to manage very well, and perhaps anxious not to disturb the wrong person.

As well as feeling sick—really sick, as if about to *be* sick—I was trembling so much that no difficult further decision was needed: investigation was just physically impossible. I withdrew into my own territory, and locked my door as quietly as I could. By conventional standards, I suppose I had heard enough to justify a robbery call to the police, but I do not think it was only the lack of a telephone that deterred me. I sat there in the dark, with my handkerchief held tightly to my nose. Soon I began to feel chilled, and crept back to the comfort of my blankets.

Mercifully the smell did not seem strong enough to penetrate, but I pressed my face hard into the pillow, and lay listening, stretching my ears hard for sounds I dreaded to hear, eager above all to draw no attention to myself. And thus, in the end, despite all discomforts, I fell asleep.

And on the Sunday morning, while I was still trying to eat my breakfast, I heard the first, distant roar of the green man's noisy car. I heard him throw open the street door with a bang and come clumping up the many flights of stairs. Neither he nor anyone else connected with the firm downstairs had ever before entered the building on a Sunday when I had been there. The man did not even pause at Mr Millar's level, as he usually did, but came straight up to the attic. I could feel my flesh creep obscurely as I heard him. Horrors often come in pairs. Instead of ringing my bell, he waited silently for a moment. Perhaps he assumed that his advent was sufficiently apparent already, as indeed it was. However, since I did nothing, he delivered an immense kick at the lower rail of the door.

I opened up with as much as I could manage of dignity. At least the faint smell seemed gone.

"Thought you would have heard me," said the man, in a thick but (as we said in those days) educated voice.

"I did."

"Well then," said the man; but as if he were offhandedly agreeing to take no exception to a slight. He stared at me hard: his manner was most unlike Mr Millar's. Nor was he wearing or carrying his pork-pie hat.

"Seen anyone about?"

"Since when?" I asked.

"Yesterday or today," said the man, as if it hardly needed saying, which of course it did not.

"No," I said truthfully. "No, I don't think so."

"Or heard?" asked the man, staring at me still harder, consciously breaking me down.

"What should I have heard?"

"People or things," said the man. "Have you?"

"Out of the ordinary, I suppose you mean?"

I was merely gaining time, but the vigour of the man's affirmation shook me.

"If you like."

I was, in fact, so shaken that I hesitated.

"What happened?" asked the man. It was the tone the prefects used to learn in public schools for interrogating the juniors.

"I don't know what it was, " I replied with extreme weakness of spirit. Doubtless I should have played my part as new boy and asked what business it was of his.

"So they've arrived," said the man, much more thoughtfully. One might almost have supposed him awed, if such a man had been capable of awe.

I felt a little stronger; as if life had passed from him to me.

"Who do you mean by *they*?" I asked.

"I'm not telling you *that*, my boy," said the man; now within distant sight of equal terms. "What I'm telling you is that you'll never see me again for dust. There's an end to all things. Thanks for the tip-off."

And he clumped off. In a moment, I heard his reverberant car explode into life and charge away as if unscorchable entities would any moment be clutching at the exhaust-pipe.

"There's an end to all things," the man had said; and clearly this was the end for me also, and in a sense far past it: an end to setting my teeth in order to face life, putting up with injurious incidentals for the supposed sake of a higher settled purpose; an end, at almost any cost, to my Brandenburg Square tenancy.

I managed to finish my breakfast ("No breakfast, no man," my father had always said), and then went down to have a word with Maureen.

After that marvellous evening when Maureen had worn the grey dress, she had reappeared a number of times, unpredictably as before; and things had continued to be marvellous, though, naturally, not so marvellous as the first time, because things seldom are. I realized very clearly that, situated as I was, I was fortunate in Maureen, though it was a disadvantage that I had virtually no voice in our arrangements, however unavoidable that might be. Very much had Maureen been a further reason for my not moving out.

Now that I had made up my mind, I took the initiative with her, even though I realized that her husband, Gilbert, would almost certainly be there too, let alone the children. It was almost the first time I had been down there since my visit soon after my arrival.

I rang, and the husband answered the door. He was in very old clothes, I could hear the children screaming in the room behind him. I hardly knew him, and, in any case, the conversation I am about to report was the only serious one I ever had with him.

"Maureen is away," he said, as if there could be no doubt why I had called. "She's in hospital. A breakdown. I'll give you the name of the hospital, if you like. Though it'll probably be some time before you'll be able to see her."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "But not altogether surprised."

I realized by his look that he completely misunderstood me.

"It's this house," I elucidated. "I've decided to move."

"If you can find anywhere else."

"Quite," I said. "I suggest you should think about moving too."

"All together, in fact?" He was not hostile, I thought, but he had again misunderstood me. It would indeed have been nice to continue living in the same building as Maureen, but I had taken for granted that it was too much to hope for, with accommodation of any kind as short as it was then; and has been ever since, needless to say.

"Splendid, if we could find anywhere. But I suggest that you and Maureen should move too in any case. This house is all wrong."

He glanced at me. "Will you come in and have a coffee? I've become quite good at pigging it since Maureen left."

"Thanks very much," I said. The situation was not what I had had in mind, but I was willing to talk about recent events to anyone remotely suitable.

"Sorry I'm not togged up." He pushed back the door for me to go in first.

The din and dust inside were duly frightful, but Maureen's husband set about making the coffee as if we had been alone in the flat, and the children stared at me for only a minute or two, then started running up and down again. I picked up the *Observer*.

"What exactly do you mean by wrong?" asked Gilbert in due course. "Milk and sugar?"

The coffee really was good, and thoroughly welcome, even though so shortly after my own small breakfast.

"The people on the floors above don't run a normal business."

His brow creased slightly. "I agree with you."

"I don't know what they do."

"Maureen doesn't either. You know we used to have that cove, Millar, *in* here from time to time. He paid a small *pourboire*, and I admit we were damned glad to have it. I find life a struggle, as I don't mind telling you. But Maureen never discovered very much about him. I never met Millar myself. I take it you know him quite well?"

"Not really."

I thought I could tell him exactly how much I did know of Mr Millar, even though I had to speak more loudly than I should have wished, because of the din in the room.

Gilbert listened very carefully, and then, after a moment's thought, shouted out: "Children! Go *outside* and play." I was surprised by the way they instantly departed and climbed up to the street: in those days, safe and almost silent on the Sabbath. "And I take it that there've been developments since?" he continued.

"In that connection I'm rather glad the children have gone," I said.

"Sex or spooks?" asked Gilbert. "Have some more coffee?" he went on before I could answer. "Sorry, I forgot."

"Thank you very much. I'm the better for it."

"I'm sorry Maureen's not here."

"I hope it'll not be too long," I said.

We paused a moment, lapping coffee.

"Are you clairvoyant?" he asked.

"Not that I know of. I'm probably too young." He was perhaps six or seven years older, despite all those children. "Why? Do you think I've imagined it all?" I put it quite amiably.

"It just struck me for one moment that you might have seen into the future. All these people slavishly doing nothing. It'll be exactly like that one day, you know, if we go on as we are. For a moment it all sounded to me like a vision of 40 years on—if as much."

And indeed I had to take a moment to consider.

"But they're doing it all the time," I objected. "Now. Well, not this moment. I *think* not this moment. But you can go up and look tomorrow. See for yourself."

"It's not something I particularly *want* to see. Forty years on. Though I *was* at Harrow, strange as it seems."

I admit that I was surprised. I doubt whether I had then knowingly met another Harrovian, though I knew the song he had quoted.

"I was sacked, of course."

I attempted an appropriately expressive look before returning to the matter in hand.

"Maureen must have seen," I continued. "Isn't that why she's not here? Wasn't it all too much for her?"

He eyed me a little; then said nothing. I suddenly apprehended the possibility that he might attribute Maureen's breakdown simply to me.

I pressed my point about the people upstairs. "Do you know how much Maureen knows? Some of what there is to know is pretty shattering."

"I really don't doubt it. I agree with all you say. I told you so."

"There's a bit more. Something rather different."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I think I should."

"Sorry the coffee's finished."

"It was good."

"Well?"

So I told him about the even odder events of that morning and of the night before. After all, I had to tell someone.

"So we've got the Un-Dead in too?" he commented.

I stared at him.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Isn't that more or less what you were implying?"

I must have continued to stare at him.

"Or did you mean something quite different?"

"On the contrary," I replied, "I think you've got it. It's just that it never occurred to me."

"That you were visited by a creature from another world than this? Or supposed you were. I thought that was your point?"

"What never occurred to me was —" I couldn't quite say it. "I've told you," I went on, "that Mr Millar gave me the impression of having something very much on his mind."

"A haunted man, in fact. Yes, I got that," said Gilbert.

I cannot pretend that my voice did not sink a little foolishly.

"This house might be haunted by the ghost of his victim."

Maureen's husband looked straight at me. "Victims. Didn't your friend in green put it in the plural?"

"Mr Millar might be always on the move, always running away. And going through the hoops in the attempt to forget. Through all the hoops he can find. Even asking me down for a drink."

"Still like 40 years on," said Maureen's husband. "But you mustn't let me philosophize. It's probably only that I'm not being a wild success myself. Why do you call him *Mr* Millar?"

I could see that it might irritate an Harrovian. But my answer, though a mere inspiration of the moment, I rather liked. "To link him with the rest of the world. He's one who needs it."

"I see," said Maureen's husband. "I'll think about what you've told me. I've never doubted that old Millar was a dead loss. I suppose I've kept away from him for that reason. Of course we're not in a position to move just at the moment. You might say that the tangible factors outweigh the intangible. So forgive me if I don't offer to sit up with you waiting for the line of nameless horrors." His expression changed. "You will forgive me? To start with, I can't leave the kids and I can hardly bring them with me."

"I never even thought of it," I replied; which was true.

"If you come screaming down the stairs at any time, don't hesitate to knock me up. Knock hard, because I sleep hard after slogging all day at the filthy shop. Besides it might scare away the apparitions."

I should perhaps have been grateful for a slightly different attitude, but one had to take the man as he obviously was. I attempted one more word.

"I see it's no business of mine, but I do sincerely advise against staying long in the same house with those people upstairs. If they were to go, of course it would be different."

"It might not, of course, from what you say. But the real trouble is that there's always something. Not just something wrong, but something badly wrong. I can see that Millar's got on your nerves and I don't blame you either. But if you'd ever lived in some of the places that Maureen and I have lived in since I was invalided out . . . Believe me, my friend, there's always something that's bloody about living among the toiling masses. From my point of view this place is a real oasis. You may see what I mean, when you start looking for somewhere else. Mind if I get the kids down again?"

"I'll go," I said. "Thank you for listening."

"Any time," he said. "Always a friendly bosom on which to lay the troubled head. I'll tell Maureen you looked in. When she's more compos, that is.

"

Needless to say, Maureen's husband proved to be almost gruesomely in the right of it. I could find nowhere else to live that was even possible; and I found much on offer that was quite horrible. That was after spending almost the whole of the next week in the search; regardless of my duties to Major Valentine. A week does not sound very long, but it is surprising how many small, dark cavities six days can unearth.

In any case, the unit of a week was critical. I should have liked at least to be sure of having somewhere else to go before having to face another Saturday and Sunday.

Messrs Stallabrass, Hoskins and Cramp seemed to be carrying on as usual, though as I was out of the house for the greater part of each day, it was impossible for me to be sure. On the Thursday night, Mr Millar was beating it up with three noisy girls until the dawn was filtering through my windows, grey as Maureen's dress.

I decided that I could not face the Saturday and Sunday nights. On the Saturday evening, I retreated to my mother, after spending a long day visiting a list of impossible addresses (many of them stated to be accessible on a Saturday only—often on a Saturday afternoon only, perhaps between two and four).

"What a surprise!" exclaimed my mother. "I wasn't sure I should ever see you again."

And when, against some reluctance on my part as well as against the usual resistance on my mother's, I returned to Brandenburg Square in the later part of the Monday morning, I found a transformation.

In the first place, I had to open the street door with my key. This was unknown during "business hours": the staff of Messrs Stallabrass, Hoskins and Cramp, and their sporting friends, pushed in and out so incessantly that a locked front door would have been ludicrous. It would have been entirely out of harmony with the firm's way of life and what would now be called "image".

Within all was quiet. All the room doors were shut, which was also quite unknown. This time I applied myself to several of the handles with confidence. Every door I tried was locked.

I put down my canvas bag and went outside again, the front door swinging shut behind me on its heavy spring.

The firm's unusually large brass plate had gone. Even the phantom shape of it was fainter than usual in these cases; the firm having been with us for so much less than the customary (or then customary) 40 or 80 years. I picked a bit at the screwholes, but nothing peeped out. I stood back and looked up at the windows of the house. All were shut, but there was nothing unusual about that. I had never noticed an open window on the floors occupied by Messrs Stallabrass, Hoskins and Cramp. I reflected that it would be no use enquiring in the basement, as Maureen's husband would be at the provisions shop. (I wondered for the first time who was nowadays collecting the children from school.) As people were now staring at me, I gave the front door a push and re-entered.

Maureen stood halfway up the first flight of stairs, as if awaiting me.

She wore a white blouse that some of my mother's generation would have called "skimpy", and a bright red skirt, and equally bright red shoes. Her

stockings gently gleamed, her hair positively shone, and her face was nothing less than radiant.

"All silent as the tomb," she said.

"Maureen!" I cried and hugged her and kissed her. It was impossible to do anything else.

"Suddenly," she said. "Quite suddenly. During the weekend. I was very ill, you know, Roy, and then almost at once I was all right. It was yesterday, and I've been in a bit of a trance ever since. I've spent this morning buying clothes that we really can't afford, and having my hair done, and just sitting in the square, and smiling at everything."

I kissed her again.

"How long have this lot been gone?" she went on. "Gilbert's departed for the weekend and taken the children. Thought I was safely shut away. What's he up to, I wonder?"

"This lot were here when I left on Saturday. Come upstairs, Maureen."

We went up arm in arm, even though I was carrying my canvas bag.

At Mr Millar's own floor, we stopped, and, for the hell of it, I tried the handle of Mr Millar's own outer door, the door into the pink room with the cornice of flowers. This time, the door opened.

I tried to push Maureen out, but I failed. Mr Millar was hanging there, in the outer office for all to see; and from a large hook, meant for hanging overcoats on a wall, which he, or someone, must have spent much time screwing into the plaster of the ceiling, or rather, I imagine, through the ceiling into one of the wooden joists of my floor above. The most curious thing was that though there was no detectable movement of air in the room, the body swung back and forth quite perceptibly, as if it had been made of *papier mâché*, or some other featherweight expendable. Even the clothes looked papery and insubstantial. Was it the real Mr Millar at all who dangled there? It was remarkably hard to be sure.

A curious thing of another kind was that though, for a long time, I had been scared out of my wits by events in the house (and Maureen perhaps literally so), yet from quite soon after that climactic Sunday, I began to feel reasonably happy there almost all the time, indeed very happy indeed when I thought about Maureen or covered her sweet hair with kisses; and entirely forgot the idea of moving, or as entirely as life ever permits one to forget anything.

The Clock Watcher (1973)

Now that it has all come to an end, so that even the police are "making enquiries", I am trying to keep myself occupied for a little by writing out a story that no one will ever believe. Or no one just yet. Possibly some new Einstein will come to my rescue, sooner or later; and prove by theory what I have learned by experience. That sort of theory is thought up about every second year nowadays, though none of the theories make much difference to ordinary people's lives.

Perhaps I never was quite an ordinary person, after all. Perhaps I ceased being ordinary when I married Ursula. Certainly they all said so; said I hadn't thought what it implied, even that I had gone a bit round the bend during the last part of the war. But, when it comes to the point, not many people bother very much about who a man marries; though it can still be different when it is the case of a girl. And of course I had no parents by then.

Will anyone ever read this but me? Well, yes, perhaps they may. So I had better mention what happened to my parents, and remember to put in a word or two about other things like that. My father fell from the top of one of his buildings when I was four years old. Of course it was a dreadful thing to happen, but I was never what is called close to my father, or so it has seemed to me since, and my mother would not let me even go to the funeral, said it would be too morbid an experience for a young child, and left me locked in the bedroom when the procession left the house. Not that you could really call it a procession, I imagine. Especially as it was simply teeming with rain. But possibly I exaggerate that aspect of it as children are apt to do. My mother died during the war I was engaged in fighting. There was nothing unusual about her death. Every second person seems to die as she did, I regret to say.

So, despite a certain amount of chat, some of it fairly hostile, I was pretty much on my own at the time of my marriage, though I had managed to struggle back into my profession, and had a very fair job, all things

considered, as a draughtsman with Rosenberg and Newton. I had better explain that too.

Old Jacob Rosenberg had been a friend of my father's: so much so that he went on keeping an eye on my mother until his own death about a year before hers. (He dropped dead on one of the platforms at Green Park underground station, which is just the way that I myself should choose to go.) His son, young Jacob, gave me a place in the office after I came back from destroying the Nazis. Of course, the Jews are like that: once a friend, always a friend, if you go on treating them properly. I cannot help saying it was where the Nazis went wrong. There was a great deal to be said in favour of the Nazis, of course, in many other ways. The Germans wouldn't have fought so hard and long, if it hadn't been so, quite unbelievable actually.

Rosenberg and Newton called themselves architects, but they were really something more speculative than that: more like business men with a good knowledge of construction. Not that they were not on the architectural register. Of course they were. Nor that their methods were not completely clean and honest. I saw enough of what went on to be quite sure about that, or I should not have stayed, however badly I needed a job, as I certainly did when mother proved to have left almost nothing. I think she had expected something appreciable from Mr Rosenberg's will, but all she got was—of all things—a clock. A *clock*. Well, the police will find the pieces of it buried in the garden, if they care to dig . . .

I had learned a lot from Rosenberg and Newton before I left them to set up in a similar line of business on my own, though far more modestly, needless to say. I have been on my own for nearly three years, not very long, but my name has become quite well thought of in this extremely prosperous suburb where so many appalling, unbelievable things have been happening to me, without anyone really knowing, though not without some observing—what there was to be observed. And, even there, it is not altogether a case of so *many* things happening. There is only *one* thing really; *one* thing that is capable of indefinite extension.

I am a quiet sort of person really. They say that you won't succeed in business unless you make friends fairly readily; especially in the property

business. Myself, I don't know about that. I have acquaintances, of course, many of them; but Ursula and I hardly went in for friends at all. We didn't need them. I had always been rather like that, and now we were wrapped up in one another and thought that third parties would only spoil things. I know that was how I felt; and, as a matter of fact, I *know* it was how she felt also. And it never seemed to stand in the way of business success: well, quite enough success to satisfy *me*. I never wanted to be so successful that I should see less of Ursula, and I simply cannot understand all those Rotary Clubs and Round Tables and Elks and Optimists, though I might have felt it right to join the British Legion, if the British Legion had been what it was after the first war. All the same, I like to dress smartly, and that *is* good for business, whatever they say. I hated the state one got into during the war. But then, though I have certain views of my own, I hated the war altogether. God, it was ghastly!

I first set eyes on Ursula when she was sitting on a bank by the roadside, somewhere near Mönchen-Gladbach. I cannot say *exactly* where it was. As a matter of fact, we actually went back some years later to look for the place, and could not find it at all. Not that I wish to suggest there was anything peculiar about that, or anything related to what was already very much happening—elsewhere. It was simply that the whole face of Germany had changed by that time, and thank God for it.

When I originally spotted Ursula, there was no traffic on the roads, first, because all the vehicles had been destroyed or commandeered; second, because in that area there were no roads that remained passable except by military stuff, tanks and jeeps. There were no people about either: local people, I mean. Of course it was nothing like the Somme and the Aisne twenty years earlier, nothing at all. It was perhaps more depressing than horrifying; anyway at a first look. The second world war was just over, and some of those whom I knew—not well, as I say—had the pleasant job of routing out the local concentration camp.

Ursula, mercifully, had nothing to do with that. She came from the Black Forest, hundreds of miles to the south. She was an only child and had lost both her parents when Freudenstadt was removed from the face of the earth. She herself had been working nearby as a domestic servant right through

the latter part of the war. This seems strange to us, but Germany never really got round to "total war" and all that, although people here think that she did. Of course, Ursula was not properly a domestic servant. She was simply allowed to masquerade as one by the people who lived in one of the big houses, and who, like many of their kind, didn't care for the Nazis. Ursula's father was a manufacturer of Black Forest souvenirs, and, Ursula told me, no one interfered very much with that either, until the very last months of the war. I describe him as a "manufacturer", because he seems to have been in a quite big way of business, with many employees, and an agreeable income. Certainly, Ursula went to a costlier school than I did, and she also emerged better educated, Nazis or no Nazis. Though I went to a public school, and a quite well-known one, it was not Eton, and the field is one where the descent from the best is steep. More than anything else, Ursula's father manufactured clocks; cuckoo clocks, painted clocks, and huge clocks in dark spiky wood or in polished spiky metal that chimed and struck and kept tabs on the phases of the moon, not to say the zodiac. I can be specific because Ursula brought many such clocks into our home; in memory of her father, or otherwise. It was the downfall and ruin of her beauty and of our love.

And how beautiful she was when my eyes first lighted upon her! Her parents being Catholics, she had been named after St Ursula of Cologne, who went on the long voyage and was ultimately martyred with all her virgins, hundreds of them, I believe; and a saint is precisely what my girl looked like—then and for a long time afterwards. She had a gentle, trusting gaze, despite everything that had happened to her; and a mouth like a soft flower at the most perfect moment of its blooming. She was still wearing the maid's black dress which had been part of her disguise, so to speak; and, again, many people will be surprised to hear that it was made of real silk. Even the fact that this dress was slightly torn and slightly dirty, added to the effect she gave of having something to do with religion. She had no property of any kind, apart from a handkerchief. That was made of silk too, but this time it was a survival from her first communion. It was very small, but it had a wide edging of lace, made—yes—by the Black Forest nuns. Later, she gave me the handkerchief as a treasure to keep. I kissed it and hid it away, but, though it seems incredible, especially to me, I realized in no time that I had managed to lose it. Of course it must be somewhere in the

house now, and I never mentioned the loss to Ursula. At the time I first saw Ursula, she was weeping into this tiny handkerchief, and I lent her a much larger one, just as the kind man does in a novel or a show. I was awaiting "repatriation" at the time, and had managed to evade any particular duties now that the destruction was over. No one who missed seeing what we did to Germany can have any idea, and the Germans put it all back in no time; Freudenstadt, as it happens, first of all, or just about.

I took Ursula under my wing at once, right close under it. It was what one did at that time, but, from the very first, I meant more by it than did most of the others, and when difficulty arose about Ursula coming to England, I had no doubt in my heart about assuring the authorities in writing that she was coming to marry me.

I hadn't seen her for more than three months and I went to Harwich to meet her. Little Attlee had come into power by then, and many of my acquaintance had voted for him, especially, as we all know, those who had been fighting under Churchill. England had started on her long soft greyness, but when Ursula emerged from her grilling by the Aliens Department, she was startlingly well turned out and accompanied by an unexpected quantity of brand new luggage. She told me that she had managed to avoid "relief agencies" of all kinds, and had always been in a real job of some sort. Ironically, it was a bit different here. Though we all know how run down England was at that time, Ursula was not permitted to take a job at all until after we were married and she had become a British citizen; so that at first she was reduced to working free of charge for a charity. It sent bundles somewhere or other; and, as in Germany, it was amazing how much had remained in back rooms with which to stuff them.

When Ursula arrived, I was back to living in my mother's and father's old house, and there was nothing to do but take her there. I was with Rosenberg and Newton by then, and young Jacob Rosenberg knew all about it, and was very kind and decent. Certain others were not; and, oddly enough, when I made it clear that I was about to marry Ursula, seemed not in the least reassured, but rather the contrary, as I have said. There was even talk of my having brought over a foreign mouth to feed. No doubt it was called a Nazi

mouth when I was not actually listening. Of course it is unconventional for the bridegroom to lead the bride from his own front door.

In my mother's house, Ursula set up the first of her clocks. I had noticed that her shiny baggage at Harwich included a black, oblong box in what looked like leather but was, in fact, a good imitation of leather. The clock inside was a cuckoo, fairly large and in plain dark wood. The bird, which was paler, emitted a sharp, strident shriek, which could be heard at the hour all over the house. At the quarters, including the half, the bird was silent, so at first I reflected that things might be worse. I was working hard both with Rosenberg and Newton (I abominate those who take money without even attempting to give a proper return for it) and also with finishing off the house before putting it up for sale; so that I could sleep like a log even with the cuckoo clock in the same room with me.

But before long the woman next door came in with a complaint about it. She refused to "discuss the matter" with Ursula and insisted upon seeing me. She was quite young, with blonde shoulder-length hair turned outward at the ends, and nice legs. Indeed, she was a nice person altogether, I thought. She said, quite agreeably, that the cuckoo kept her three little boys awake all night. "It doesn't sound like a *cuckoo*, at all," I remember her saying. I couldn't disagree, but replied that clock cuckoos seldom do; which is, surely, true enough? I said I would speak to Ursula about it, and even, at that early stage, so to say, I thought I detected a gleam of scepticism in the woman's eye, though a scepticism that was not unfriendly to *me*. "I'll do what I can," I concluded, and the woman smiled very nicely, and attempted no further argument. I was rather shocked to realize that the wretched cuckoo could be heard at all outside the house.

Ursula did not enter into the spirit of what was, after all, a typically British situation. On the contrary, when I raised the question, in as offhand a manner as I could manage, she became tense, which with her was unusual; and when I suggested that the cuckoo might be silenced at least during the night, bedded down in the nest, as it were, she cried out, "That would be fatal."

I was at the same time astonished—and yet not astonished. I have to leave it at that.

"We could easily have someone in to make the necessary adjustment," I said mildly, though, I suppose, with some pressure behind the words.

"No one may touch my clocks except the person I bring," she replied. Those were her exact words, very faintly foreign in form, though by now Ursula spoke English pretty well, having improved her knowledge of it with a speed that amazed me.

"Your *clocks*, darling?" I queried, smiling at her. Of course I knew of only one.

She did not answer me but said, "That woman with her hair and legs! What business of hers is our life?" It was curious how Ursula specified the very points that I myself, as a man, had noticed about our neighbour. I was often aware of Ursula's extraordinary insight; sometimes it was almost telepathic.

Even then, however, it seemed to me that Ursula was more frightened than aggressive, let alone jealous, as other women would have been. I reflected that a foreigner might well be upset by a complaint from a neighbour and uncertain how to deal with it. Already, Ursula was smiling through her sulkiness and telling me that even the sulks were assumed. All the same, it was obvious that there was a reality somewhere in all this.

Ursula duly did precisely nothing about the shrieking, nocturnal cuckoo. But shortly after the approach by our glamorous neighbour, Ursula and I married and moved on.

The wedding took place, of necessity, in the local Catholic church, and I admit that it was one of the most unnerving experiences I had by then been through, war or no war. The keen young priest was bitterly antagonistic and, at the actual ceremony, kept his burning eyes fixed upon me at every moment the ritual left possible, as if he hoped to sear me into "conversion" there and then, or, alternatively, to scorch and dissolve me from the backbone outwards. And, of course, in those days I had to sign a declaration that all our children would be raised in the Catholic faith. (And quite right too from the Catholic point of view.)

Ursula, moreover, seemed different—very different. This was territory that was hers, and not mine: and more, of course, than just territory. I am sure she tried to bring me in too, but there was nothing really possible for her to do about that. Earlier she had been upset when I refused in advance to wear a wedding ring in ordinary life, as it were, in the way the continentals do. But there was nothing for me to do about that either.

Most weddings are matters of equal gain and loss. It is not the wedding that counts, though so many girls think it is. Weddings are, at the best, neutral. Seldom are they even fully volitional.

But I should say at once, very clearly, that Ursula and I were happy, incredibly happy. It would not be sensible to expect happiness like that to last, and I now see that I stopped expecting any such thing a long time ago. Our happiness was not of this adult world, where happiness is only a theory. Ursula and I were happy in the way of happy children. What could we expect, then? But other kinds of happiness are merely resignation; and often abject defeat.

People couldn't at that period go abroad for their honeymoons, so Ursula and I went to Windermere and Ullswater. They seemed more suitable than Bournemouth or than even Kipling's South Downs, by now under crops. Ursula excelled me without difficulty in swimming, sailing, and fell-walking alike. Marriage had sheered off the first edge of romance from our actual caresses, but there was a sweet affection between us, as between a devoted brother and a devoted sister, though I suppose that is not an approved way of putting it. I always wanted a sister, and never more than at this present moment.

Our nights were certainly quieter without the noisy clock, though Ursula had brought with her a small substitute. It did not work on the cuckoo principle, and indeed neither chimed nor struck in any way. Even its tick was so muted as to be inaudible. None the less, it was in appearance a pleasant object, brightly painted; in the modern world, still very much a souvenir. Ursula said that she had merely seen it in a shop window and "been unable to resist it". I wondered at the time from whom she had learned that always slightly sinister phrase; and I fear that I also wondered, even at the time, whether her story was strictly true. This sounds a horrible

thing to say, but later it emerged that something horrible indeed was all around us, however difficult to define. I imagine that the little clock that accompanied us on our honeymoon had been constructed by the insertion of a very subtle and sophisticated mechanism into a more or less intentionally crude and commercial case. It purred like a slinky pussy, and when, later, I clubbed it to shards, I daresay I destroyed more than £100 of purchase money.

One curious thing I noticed on the honeymoon. I may perhaps have *noticed* it earlier, but I am very sure that it was on our honeymoon that I spoke about it. This was that for all her obvious interest in clocks, Ursula never had the least idea of the time.

We were sitting by the water near Lowwood, and dusk was coming on.

"It's growing very dark," said my Ursula, in her precise way. "Is there a storm coming?"

"It's getting dark because it's nearly seven o'clock," I replied. This was in April.

She turned quite panicky. "I thought it was only about three."

This was absurd, because we had not even reached the waterside until well after that. But we had been much occupied while we had been sitting and lying there, so that, after thinking for a moment, all I said was "You need a watch, my darling. I'll buy you one for your birthday."

She answered not a word, but now looked angry as well as frightened. I remembered at once that I had made a mistake. I had learned the previous year that Ursula disliked her birthday being even mentioned, young though she was; let alone being celebrated, however quietly. I had, of course, without thinking used a form of words common when the idea of a present arises.

"Sorry, darling," I said. "I"ll give you a watch some other time." Oh, that word "time".

"I don't want a watch." She spoke so low that I could hardly hear her. "I can't wear a watch."

I *think* that was what she said, but she might have said, "I can't bear a watch". I was uncertain at the time, but I made no enquiry. If it was a matter of *wearing* a watch, we all know that there are people who cannot. My own father's elder brother, my Uncle Allardyce, is one of them, for example.

In any case, the whole thing was getting out of proportion, not to say out of control. Endeavouring to make the best of my mistake, I kept my mouth shut, tried to smile, and gently took Ursula's hand.

Her hands were particularly small and soft. They always fascinated and delighted me. But now the hand that I took hold of was not merely cold, but like a tight bag of wet ice.

"Darling!"

I could not help almost crying out; nor, I fear, could I help dropping her hand. I was completely at a loss for the proper thing to do next; as if something altogether unprecedented had happened.

She sat there, rather huddled; and then she gazed up at me, so sweetly, so lovingly, and so helplessly.

I sprang to my feet. "Get up," I cried, in my brotherly way—or the way I always thought of as brotherly. I lifted her on to her legs, pulling her not by the hands but by the shoulders, which was always easy, as she was so petite in every way. "Get up, get up. We must run back. We must run."

And run we did, without a word of comment or argument from her; though not all the way, or anything like it, because we were staying about a couple of miles off in a sort of apartment house owned by a retired school-teacher named Mrs Ardale.

In theory, I could have afforded something rather better, but the big hotels were either out of action just then or in some way unsuitable. In the end, I had just gone to the Post Office and enquired, and they had told me about

Mrs Ardale at once. It seemed a queer way to organize a honeymoon, especially when we are supposed to have only one honeymoon in each lifetime, but Ursula and I were like that from the first—and for some time still lying ahead. In any case, between us the idea of a honeymoon was a bit of a joke, as it often is in these times; but, for Ursula and me, a tender joke, which is perhaps *not* so usual. Mrs Ardale, by the way, was a divorcee, unlikely though that seems. She never stopped mentioning the fact. She also wore a very obvious chestnutty wig, though Ursula said her own hair was perfectly all right when one was permitted to catch a glimpse of it. I never took to Mrs Ardale, but she certainly kept the place very clean, which was important to Ursula, and food at that time was much of a muchness everywhere, or, rather, little of a littleness. Mrs Ardale used to serve us crabs caught in the lake. Not every day, of course.

Later, we moved on to a less satisfactory place, high above Ullswater. It was a bit of a shack in every way, but, fortunately, Ursula seemed not to mind much, possibly because she was now really getting into her athletic stride, small though she was. She was often a long way ahead of me at the crest of the fell, and she could swim like one of those slender, swift fish that never seem to undulate (or are they really fish?). But it was when we hired a dinghy and went sailing that I felt almost embarrassed by my uselessness and general ineptitude. Ursula always *looked* so competent, and she always seemed to have exactly the right clothes for whatever we were doing, simple though they were. I myself both look and feel better in business clothes—clothes for ordinary life in town. But I reflected that the hire-dinghies could hardly be at their best from a handling point of view after five years of total war and with no tackle yet available for repairing them; and, in any case, I have never seen myself as any kind of sportsman, nor has my health seemed to suffer from it. I liked my darling to be so spry and agile when we were on holiday together. I never minded in the least being shown up by her, though many would have said it would be bad from a business point of view. But at that time it could hardly have mattered, as I was still with Rosenberg and Newton, and not yet self-employed.

Which, needless to say, was why, when we settled down again, we started buying a house in the same suburb, the place where I had always lived. Also, old Newton, young Jacob's partner from his father's time, was able to

help us a lot there: not only with getting a really good mortgage, but with getting a really good house too, and quite reasonably cheap, as he was in a position to put a little quiet pressure on the man who was selling. The property business is full of aspects like that, and it is useless to deny it. It always has been, and doubtless it always will be, until we mostly become cave-dwellers again, which may be soon. It was a remarkably good thing to have old Newton behind one when one was looking for a suburban house about twelve months after the second world war, especially as he was in local politics, which the Rosenbergs, father and son, always made a point of avoiding.

But Ursula would have done well in one of those caves. I could imagine her, small though she was, in a bearskin, and nothing much else; and coping with all that might arise far better than I can cope with even a luxury hotel, and terribly sweet and attractive all the time, often unbearably so. As it was, she settled down as if she had lived in this steady-as-she-goes suburb all her life. *This* suburb. *This* house. We had given more than three weeks to our honeymoon, world scarcity or no world scarcity. Speaking for myself, I could have gone on like that with Ursula for ever. I have a conscience, but few strong ambitions, as I have said. Oh, I can see Ursula's deep blue eyes now—as they were then—on our honeymoon—and afterwards.

But as soon as we were well and truly in, Ursula brought out no fewer than three more clocks. They were additional to the original cuckoo clock, and, I suppose, to the soft-speaking traveler's clock also. As it happens, I was never told at the time what became of that one. When I enquired, putting in a good word for the quietness, Ursula simply replied that "it was a once-for-all clock for a once-for-all purpose, darling," and smiled at me knowingly, or mock-knowingly.

"That was a clock I really liked, darling," I replied, but she said nothing in return, knowing perfectly well that, even then, I did not really like any of the others.

The truth was, from first to last, that one could not *talk* at all to Ursula about the clocks. About many other things, including some that were beyond my own scope, as I am no intellectual; and at almost any time: but never about *them*—about the clocks. One's words seemed to slip off her

pretty, perfect body, her prettily chosen, freshly ironed dress, and then to dissolve on the carpet around her pink or yellow high-heeled shoes. I have in mind the grey carpet with the big, bold chains of flowers on which I last saw her standing and saying her listless goodbye when I set out to consult Dr Tweed.

I have said that *one* could not talk on the subject to Ursula. I suppose it would be truer to say that *I* could not. That, before long, was just the point. Perhaps there was another who could.

But, then, what normal, ordinary person—English person, anyway—could like those particular clocks; or at least so many of them? A single decorated clock, possibly—if the person cared for things of that general type—as I admit many seem to—though fewer perhaps than formerly. I am fairly sure that, at the best, the quantity of souvenirs brought back to Britain from the Black Forest by the public at large is nothing like what it was when the Prince Consort was alive and setting the vogue, with real trees at Christmas as well. And now it is years after the end of the second world war.

The clocks that Ursula brought into the house were not all grotesque in themselves: not all of them were carved into grinning gnomes, or giants with long teeth, or bats with wings that seemed to have altered their positions from time to time, though never when one was looking (or, once more, never when *I* was looking)—though *some* of them were, indeed, carved in those ways. It was more the overall uncouth monotony of the clocks that palled: *that*, more than the detail work applied to any one of them. As time passed, Ursula brought in more and more clocks, until, long before the end, I was almost afraid to count how many. I own it. I am not in the least ashamed of it, and what went on to happen, showed that I had no reason to be.

The clocks were so evenly brown—dark brown. When there was coloured detail, and often there was a mass of it, the colours were never bright colours. Or rather they were, and, at the same time, they weren't. I have often thought that the sense of colour is not strong in Germany. Of course, no one country can expect to have everything, and the last thing I wish to do is introduce an element of rivalry. I detest all things like that.

The coloured decoration of the clocks reminded me of fungus on a woodland tree, and there are many who find fungi not only fascinating but actually beautiful. One can eat many of them, if one has to, and sometimes I felt exactly that about the coloured clock decorations. They looked *edible*—upon compulsion. I imagine that the people who thought up the style in the first place based it upon what they saw in the vast, dark forests around them. The fungi, the teeth, the wings, the dark or shiny brownness. Even the shrieking and calling of the hours and the quarters might have been imitated from the crying of extinct, forest fowl. When there was a chorus of it in the same house, the effect was very much of a dark glade in which some unfortunate traveller had been deserted—or had merely lost his way.

This house is a fair-sized structure for these times, and the clocks were distributed about it very evenly, there being seldom more than three in any single room, and often only one. I fancy (or perhaps I know) that Ursula wanted there to be no room in our house without *one* of her clocks in it. Distribution was important. It is true that it dispersed the quarterly chorus, but, on the other hand, it positively enhanced the forest glade impression, especially if one were alone in any of the rooms. First, one creature would shrill out, and then, almost instantly, another and another, all at different distances in the house, and with very different cries, and another and another and another; some, one was aware, made of wood, usually carved crudely but elaborately, others made of tin or sheet steel, some made even of plastic. Of course we in the construction business have good reason to be grateful for the coming of plastic, but I like it to keep its proper place, and not set about devouring every other material in the home, as it is very apt to do.

As will be imagined, clocks often spoke simultaneously, but what I found particularly eerie was the sequence of sound that arose when two or more of them not so much coincided as overlapped. This effect, in the nature of things, was seldom repeated in precisely the same form. Clocks only harmonize to *that* degree when a team of scientists has been at work on the design and setting up (if even then). In this house, the normal tiny variations in the time-keeping led to sounds that were unpredictable and often quite disturbing. And this was true even though most of our clocks spoke but once, however frequently they did it. Not all, however: Ursula had found

some expensive pieces in which the bird sang a whole song. One of these vocalists was golden all over, from tail to beak; and lived in a golden schloss with a tiny golden deathshead upon every pinnacle of it. Another was a shrunk-down bird of paradise with variegated feathers, though whether the feathers were real or not I am unable to say. There would seem to be problems in finding feathers like bird-of-paradise feathers except that they had to be one-tenth, perhaps, of the size. What I can testify is that our wee friend squawked as loud as his full-grown cousin can possibly have done in the forest deep.

How could Ursula afford such treasures? Where did she find her clocks, in any case? Only once, to the best of my belief, did she return after her marriage to Germany. That was when she went with me on our little trip around the region where we had met and had become such friends. And, as far as I am aware, she did not then range even near to the Black Forest.

The answer to my two questions appears to have been that a seller of clocks visited our house when I was not there; and that his terms were easy, though in one sense only.

I am reasonably sure that these visits went on for a long time before I had any inkling of them. Needless to say, that state of affairs is common enough in any suburb; matter mainly for a laughter session, except for those immediately affected.

I used merely to notice when I came home, that the clocks had been moved around, sometimes almost all of them; and that every now and then there seemed to have been a new acquisition. Once or twice it was my ears that first told me of the newcomer, rather than my eyes. The mixed-up noise made by all the different clocks had odd effects upon me. I felt tensed up immediately I entered the house; but it was not entirely disagreeable. Far from it, in fact. The truth seemed to be that this tensing up brought me nearer to Ursula than at other times, and in a very real and practical way, which many other husbands I am acquainted with would be glad to have the secret of. For example, we were never quite the same together when we were elsewhere, even when we were together in her own homeland. Then it was more like brother and sister, as I have said; though fine in its own way too. What is more, my response to the clocks could vary almost 100 per

cent. Sometimes the real din they made could drive me quite crazy, so that I barely knew what I was doing or even thinking. At other times, I hardly noticed anything. It is difficult to say anything more about it.

Then I began to observe that divers small repairs seemed to have been done. For a long while I said nothing. Ursula could not be made to talk about her clocks, and that seemed to be that. One shakes down even to mysteries, when so much else in a relationship is right, as it was in ours. But on a certain, important occasion, there were two things at the same time.

This house offers a completely separate dining-room (as well as a third sitting-room which I tried for a time to use as a kind of sub-office), and in this dining-room Ursula had set up a clock made like a peasant hut, with imitation thatch, from beneath which Clever Kuckuck peeked out every half-hour and whistled at us. (We were spared the other two quarters—with this particular clock.) During a period of time before the evening in question, it had become obvious that something was wrong with Kuckuck. Instead of springing at us with his whistle, he seemed merely to sidle out, quite slowly; to stand there hunched to one side; and rather to croak than to shrill. He was plainly ailing, but I said nothing; and he continued to ail for a period of weeks.

Then on that evening I heard him and I saw him as he spoke up at the very instant I entered the dining-room. He was once more good as in the factory.

I truly believed my comment was spontaneous and involuntary.

"Who's fixed Old Cuckoo?" I asked Ursula.

She said nothing. That was as usual on the particular topic, but this time she did not begin serving the broth either. She just stood there with the ladle in her hand, and I swear she was shaking. Well, of course she was. I know very well now.

I think it was this shaking, combined with her rather insulting silence (accustomed though I was), that made me behave badly, which I had almost never done before. Perhaps never at all. I think so. Never to anyone.

"Well, who?"

I am afraid that I half-shouted at her. It is well known that seeing a woman in a shaky state either softens a man or hardens him.

As she just went on silently shaking, I bawled out something like "You're just going to tell me what's going on for once. Who is it that looks after these clocks of yours?"

And then—at that precise moment—a voice spoke right behind me. It was a new voice, but what it had to say was not new. What it said was "Cuckoo"; but it said it exactly like a human voice, speaking rather low, not at all like one of these infernal machines.

I wheeled round, and there at the centre of the dining-room sideboard, staring at me, stood a small clock in gilt and silver that had not been there even at breakfast that morning, or, as far as I knew, anywhere else in the house. It was covered with filigree which sparkled and winked at me. It was also very fast. I knew that without having to consult my watch or anything else. Ursula, as I have said, never seemed to bother very much about whether her clocks showed the right time or not, but I had become so conscious of time—at least, of "*the* time"—that for most of it I knew what it was as if by a new instinct.

At this point, Ursula spoke. Her words were: "A man comes from Germany. He knows how to handle German clocks." She spoke quietly but distinctly, as if the words had been rehearsed.

I am sure I stared at her; probably even glared at her.

"How often does he come?" I asked.

"As often as he can manage," she replied. She spoke with considerable dignity; which tended of itself to put me in the wrong.

"And what about you?" I asked.

She smiled—in her usual, sweet way. "*What* about me?" she rejoined.

And of course I could not quite answer that. My own question had been too vague, perhaps also too idiomatic for a foreigner; though I knew myself what I meant.

"It is necessary that he should come regularly," Ursula continued. "Necessary for the clocks. He keeps them going." She was still smiling, but still shaking also, possibly more than before. I fancy that what had happened was that she had made a big decision: the decision to disclose something to me for the first time. She was bracing herself, nerving herself, consciously drawing upon her hold over me.

"Oh, of course it would never do," I said, sarcastically taking advantage of her, "it would never do if all the clocks stopped at the same time."

And then came the greatest astonishment of that important evening. As I spoke, Ursula went absolutely white and fainted.

She dropped to the floor with a crash, an extremely loud crash for so small a person. And there is something else to be sworn to, if anyone cares. I swear that the small filigree clock with the soft, human voice said "Cuckoo" again at this point, although two or three minutes only could have passed since it had spoken before.

I looked up the *Homelovers' Encyclopaedia* and did not take long to bring Ursula round again. But it was, naturally, impossible to return to the same subject. And, what is more, Ursula from then on developed a new wariness which was quite obvious to me—perhaps meant to be obvious, though that was hard to tell. But now I am fairly convinced that the evening when I made Ursula faint was the turning point. It was then that I really muffed things; missed my chance—possibly my only chance—of coming frankly to terms with Ursula, and helping her. Of helping myself, also.

As it was, Ursula's rather too obvious wariness had a bad effect on me. I feel that if a wife has to have a big secret in her life, she should at least make a successful job of concealing it from her husband completely. It is generally agreed to be the kind of thing a woman should be good at. But no doubt it is particularly difficult when the husband and wife are of different nationalities.

What I found was that the absence of change in Ursula's behaviour towards me in any other respect (or, at least, of visible change) only made things worse. I could no longer be completely relaxed with her when all the time I was aware of this whole important topic which we never mentioned. I felt myself beginning to shrink. I seemed to detect a faint patronage in her caresses and her affection. I felt they were like the attentions paid to a child before it is of an age to come to grips with the world on its own: sincere, of course; deeply felt, even; but different from the attentions bestowed on an equal.

I believe that Ursula's idea, conscious or otherwise, was to make up for having to shut me out in one direction by redoubling her assurances in others. As time passed, she seemed for the most part not less demonstrative but more; sometimes almost too responsive to be quite convincing. I found myself comparing my situation with that of a man I know whose wife took to religion. "Nothing could be any good with the marriage after that," he said; and, poor fellow, he actually wept over it, in the presence of another man. It was one of those dreadful liberal kinds of religion too, where one never knows where one is. Not, of course, that I am criticizing religion in a general way. There's much to be said for religion in general. It's just that it's no good for a marriage when one of the parties enters a whole world that the other cannot share. With Ursula it was not perhaps a whole world, but it was certainly a secret world, and certainly a terrible one, in so far as I have ever understood it at all.

I began trying to catch her out. I am ashamed of this, and I was ashamed of it at the time. The bare fact was that I could not help myself. I think that other men in similar situations, or in situations that seemed similar, have felt the same. One cannot prevent oneself setting trips and traps. And something else soon struck me. This was that had not Ursula and I been so close to one another, so exclusive, the present situation might have been more manageable, might have caused me less anguish. I saw what a *sensible* case there was for not putting all one's eggs in the same basket. And my seeing the sheer common sense of that—while being totally unable to act upon it—was another thing that was bad for both of us.

By now I had left Rosenberg and Newton and was set up on my own. I called myself a property consultant, but right from the start I was making small investments also, and borrowing the money to do it. I have always been able to keep my head above water, partly because I have never sought to fly up to the stars. If one wants to go up there, and to stay up there of course, one needs to rise from foundations set up by one's father, and preferably one's grandfather also. My father was just not like that, and neither of my grandfathers made much mark either. As a matter of fact, one of them was no more than a small pawnbroker: a very useful trade in those days, none the less.

Being on my own enabled me to watch over Ursula in a way that would otherwise have been impossible. I insisted upon clients and enquirers making an appointment. A local girl named Stevie looked after all that, and did it quite well, until she insisted on marrying one of those Indian students, strongly against my advice, and then going out there. The next local girl was less satisfactory; the great thing about her being that she was always ill, one thing after another, and all of them supported by medical certificates. Still we got by: most people expect little in the way of efficiency nowadays, and especially when, by one's whole existence in their lives, one is supposed to be making money for them. Nowadays that makes them so guilty and uneasy that difficulties and delays pass unnoticed.

So that when there were no appointments in the book, I was usually to be found snooping round my own happy home, spying on Ursula, hoping (or dreading) to catch her clock man by the heels.

I took to arriving home "unexpectedly". Some days, and with equal unexpectedness, I refused, at the very last moment, to depart from home at all.

I could only be touched when Ursula seemed filled with joy to see me back so soon; or sweetly delighted at finding she had a whole, long day in which to do nothing but look after me, perhaps go to an entertainment with me. For I felt that taking her away from the house for hours on end without warning might serve some useful purpose too. If I had an appointments book, surely the clock man must have one also, coming, as he did, from so great a distance?

On several different occasions, and unmistakably, I did hear retreating feet: and each time, or so I thought, the same step, rather quick and, as one might say, sharp on the ground, but never, seemingly, in anything that could properly be called flight. This house offers a completely separate approach to the back door: a path paved with concrete slabs and leading to an access road for the delivery vehicles. But passing round the side of the building from one front to the other is a little troublesome. On one side is a very narrow passage, which, as well as being unevenly paved, is often damp and slippery with dead leaves. On the other, is one of those trellis gates so often seen in the suburbs and which no one ever opens if he can possibly help it. The idea of giving chase, therefore, was hardly even practicable. On the other hand, I was not so far sunk as to tax Ursula with vexing questions as soon as I had entered the house. Nor did I ever hear these steps from *within* the house; always from the little garden in front, or even from the road outside. And I should say at once that the steps of others visiting the back door were often perfectly audible in that way. There was nothing odd in itself about my hearing those particular steps, except that they were particular, or seemed so to me.

And once, but only once, I heard a voice for which I could not account. It was a winter night and there had been a fall of snow. I cannot remember whether I had returned especially early. I took advantage of the muffling snow to creep up the few steps of path from the gate and to bend beneath the lighted living-room window with the tightly drawn curtains. (Ursula was attentive to all details.) It was not a thing I often did. In the first place, it was only practicable when it was pitch dark. In the second place, I disliked having to listen through the window and the wall to those clicking, clacking clocks. None the less, it was the room in which Ursula normally awaited me; a room with a coal fire and big soft sofas. After a while, I straightened up, and set my ear to the icy glass of the window itself. Possibly it was from some kind of intuition or telepathy that I listened that particular night.

I heard a voice, which was certainly a strange one, in more senses than one. It was the voice of a man right enough, and assuredly not of a man I knew. In any case, very few men entered our home as guests. Neither of us wanted them in that way.

It was a rather monotonous, rather grating voice. It said something, there was a silence, and then it said something else. I supposed that during what seemed to me to be silences, Ursula had spoken, and that the man had then replied. I strained and strained, but not a sound from Ursula could I hear, and not a word from the man could I understand. Of course not, I thought: he is speaking in a foreign tongue. As for Ursula, it was true that her voice was always a low one (doesn't Shakespeare say that is a good thing in a woman?); and I had acquired little experience of eavesdropping upon it, because I had seldom before made the attempt.

From the first moment of hearing it, I linked the man's voice with those quick, firm footsteps. It was exactly the voice I should have expected that man to have. I was doubtless almost bound to link the two, but it was really more than a link. I can only state that it was a certainty. And the fact that the man was probably talking in a foreign language further enraged me against all trespassers, all uninvited guests.

I stooped down again as if I might be detected through a crevice between the curtains, even though Ursula's drawing of curtains left no crevices, and then realized that my heart was pounding fit to bust. How preposterous if I were to have one of those attacks that so many men have! The thought did enter my mind, but it availed nothing to stay the whirlwind of fury that was now sweeping through me. I drew myself to my fullest height (I felt it was far more than that) and rapped uncontrollably on the glass with my mother's ruby ring, which I always wear on my right small finger. The noise, I thought, would be audible all the way to the corner down by the church. At last I had made a demonstration of some kind. As I rapped, a few small flakes of snow began once more to descend. Perhaps it would more properly be called sleet.

The front door over to my left opened, and Ursula charged out into the sleety darkness. Her high heels clattered down the crazy paving. She always dressed up to greet my coming home; making a mutual treat of it every evening.

She cried out to me. "Darling!"

In the wide beam of silvery light from the open door, she looked like a fairy in a pantomime.

"Darling, what has *happened?*" she cried.

She stretched her hands up to my shoulders and, even though my shoulders were touched with sleet, kept them there. It occurred to me at once that she was gaining time for someone to make off. I could not bring myself actually to force her away, to push her down into the freezing whiteness.

"Who was talking to you?" I cried. But my voice was caught up in the tightness within me and only made a cackle, completely ridiculous.

"Silly boy!" said Ursula, still holding me in such a way that I could not throw her off without a degree of force that neither of us could forgive.

"Who?" I gurgled out, and then began coughing.

"It was just the bird crying out," she replied, and let go of me altogether. I knew that I had forced her into saying something she had not wished to say. Her ceasing to hold me also: it was true that a visitor would by then have had time to make away, but it was also true that I had behaved in a manner to forfeit her embrace.

Still choking and coughing, quite ludicrous, I dashed into the house; and inside was something which was not ludicrous at all. The hallway and the living-room were less than half-lighted (it would hardly have been possible even to read, I thought subsequently), but, dim though it was, I saw that indeed a bird there seemed to be: not merely squawking but actually flapping round, just under the living-room ceiling, and more than once striking itself with a rap or thud against the fittings.

It was very frightening, and I made a fool of myself. I cried out "Keep it off! Keep it off!" I covered my eyes with my hands, and should have liked to cover my ears also.

It lasted only a matter of seconds. And then Ursula had entered the room behind me and turned the lights full on from the switchplate at the door. She

had a slightly detached expression, as of one reluctantly witnessing the inevitable consequence of a solemn warning disregarded.

"It was just the bird crying out," she said again soberly.

But what I saw, now that the light was on, was the look of the cushion on the sofa opposite to the sofa on which Ursula had been sitting. Someone had been seated opposite to her, and there had been no time to smooth away the evidence of it.

As for the bird, it had simply vanished in the brighter light.

All I could do was drag upstairs in order to deal with my attack of coughing. When, after a considerable time, I came down again, the cushions were all as smooth as in a shop, and Ursula was on her feet offering me a glass of sherry. We maintained these little formalities almost every evening.

That night, as we lay together, it struck me that Ursula herself might have sat, for some reason, first on one sofa then on the other, her usual one.

All the same, Ursula *had* once actually admitted that a man sometimes came to mess about with the clocks; and about six months after the evening I have just described, I was provided with third-party evidence of it. And from what a quarter!

It was young Wally Walters. He is not a man I care for—if you can call him a man. He seems to think the whole suburb has nothing to do but dance to the tune of his flute. He has opinions of his own on everything, and he puts his nose in everywhere—or tries to. He has had a most unfortunate influence on the Parochial Church Council, and the Amateur Dramatic Society has never been the same since he took it over. What is more, I strongly suspect that he is not normal. I saw a certain amount of that during the war, but men who are continually under fire can, I fancy, be excused almost anything. In our suburb, it is still very much objected to, whatever may be the arguments on the other side. Be that as it may, young Walters always greets me when we happen to meet, as he does everyone else, and I have no wish actually to quarrel with him. Besides, it would probably by now be a mistake.

Young Wally Walters never says "Good morning" or "Good evening" in the normal way, but always something more casual and personal, such as "Hello, Joe"—that at the least, and soon he is trying to put his hand on one's arm. He makes a point of behaving as if everyone were his intimate friend.

And so it was that evening—for it was another case of things happening in the evening.

"Hello, Joe," Wally Walters cooed at me as I stepped round the corner of the road into sight of my home. "You're just in time to miss something."

"Evening," I rejoined. Almost always he has something silly to say, and I make a point of refusing ever to rise to it, if only for the simple reason that it is never worth rising to.

"I said you've just got back in time to miss something."

"I heard you say that," I replied, smiling.

But nothing ever stopped him saying his piece, just like the village idiot.

"Great tall bloke with clocks all over him," said Wally Walters. "Man a mile high at least."

I admit that this time it was I who clutched at him. In any case, he was watching me very steadily with his soft eyes, as I have noticed that he seems to watch everyone.

"*Covered* with clocks," he went on. "All up his back and all round his hat. Just as in the song. And pendulums and weights dangling from both hands. He must be as strong in the back and arms as a full-time all-in wrestler. I missed most of his face. Unfortunate. I'd have given a shilling to see all of it. But he was dressed like an old-fashioned undertaker. Wide-brimmed black hat—to carry the clocks, I suppose. And a long black coat—a real, old bedsider, I should call it. Perhaps he *is* a turn of some kind? What do you say? I presume he's a family friend. He came out of your front gate as if he lived there. I say, lay off holding me like an old boa constrictor. I haven't

said something out of place, have I?" Of course he said that knowing he had, and knowing that I knew he had.

"Where were *you*?" I asked him, taking my hand off him. I was determined not to over-react.

"Coming out of Doctor Young's. I'm collecting for the Sclerosis, if it interests you, but the doctor's answer was a dusty one."

"Where did the man go?" I asked him, quite calmly and casually; almost, I thought, in his own style.

"You mean, the man with the tickers and tockers?"

Wally Walters was continuing to stare at me in the way I have described. I have never been able to decide whether his gaze is as penetrating as it seems, or whether it is all somewhat of an act.

I nodded, but concealing all impatience.

"Well," said Wally Walters, "I can tell you this. He didn't go into any of the other houses that I could see."

"So," I enquired, as offhandedly as I could, "you followed him for some of the way?"

"Only with my eyes, Joe," he replied with that slightly mocking earnestness of his. "But my eyes followed him until he vanished. He wasn't carrying on like the ordinary door-to-door salesman. He seemed to be making a special call on you. That was why I spoke. Do you collect fancy clocks, Joe?"

"Yes," I replied, looking clean away from him. "As a matter of fact, my wife does collect clocks."

"She'll have had the offer of some weird ones this time," responded Wally Walters. "Bye, Joe." And he sauntered off, looking to right and left for someone else with whom to pass his special time of day.

I stormed into my house, banging several doors, but failed to find Ursula all dressed up in the living-room, in accordance with our usual routine.

I tracked her down in the kitchen, where she was slicing up rhubarb, always one of her favourite foodstuffs. "Sorry, darling," she said, wiping her hands on her apron, and stretching up to kiss me. "I'm late and you're early."

"No," I replied. "I'm late. I've just missed a visitor."

And, as so often, one of the clocks chose that precise moment to shout at me. "Cuckoo. Cuckoo." Only I suppose it said it five times, or six: whichever hour it was.

"Yes," said Ursula, looking away, and not having kissed me after all. "All the clocks have been adjusted."

I could tell that they had. There was an almost simultaneous clamour of booming and screeching from all parts of the house.

"I'm sure that's very useful," I jeered feebly; or I may have said "helpful".

"It's very *necessary*," Ursula observed calmly, but with more spirit than usual, at least on this particular subject. It was as if she had taken a double dose of some quick-acting tonic. That struck me even at the time. It was as if she were staying herself artificially against my pryings and probings and general gettings at her. I thought even then that one could hardly blame her.

And then—a few weeks later, I suppose, or it may have been two or three months—came what the local paper called our "burglary". It was not really a burglary, because, though it happened during the night, virtually nothing was taken. I imagine it was a job by these modern young thugs who just like smashing everything up out of boredom and because they can so easily come by too much money too young; smashing people up too, when the circumstances are right. No one was ever laid by the heels for wrecking our house. It is very seldom that anyone is. The kids cover up for one another against us older people, and especially when we seem to have a bit of property.

Ursula and I were away for the weekend at the time, or of course I should have wakened up and gone after the thugs with a rod and a gun, as our colonel used to put it when urging us on to the slaughter. We had a rule that we went away for one weekend in every four. I thought it was good for Ursula to have a change at regular intervals; a short break away that she knew she could depend on. And I liked to drag her away from her clocks, even though she never seemed quite the same without them. We went to different small hotels in the car—in quiet towns 40 or 50 miles away, or sometimes at the seaside: from the Friday night to the Sunday night. I must acknowledge that often we spent much of the time in bed, paying the extra to have the meals brought up. We never went to stay with friends; partly for that reason, but not only. Staying with friends is seldom much of a relaxation in any direction, I should say.

When I woke that Sunday morning in the hotel, I thought immediately that Ursula looked different. This was even though I could only see her back. I sat up in bed and really peered at her, as she slept with her head turned away from me, and her mouth a little open. Then I realized what I was seeing: there were grey threads in her beautiful blonde hair, and I had never noticed them before because the light had never fallen in quite the right way to show them up. In that very strong early morning sunlight, the grey in Ursula's hair seemed to come even in streaks, rather than merely in threads. The sight made me feel intensely sad and anxious.

Ursula never had trouble with sleeping. It was one of the many, many nice things about her. That morning, as I watched her—for quite a time, I believe—she was deeply sunk; but suddenly, as people do, she not merely woke up, but sat up. She put a hand at each side of her face, as if she saw something horrifying, or maybe just felt it within and around her. Her eyes were staring out of her head, and, what is more, they looked quite different—like the eyes of some other person.

I put my arms round her and drew her down to me, but even while I did so, I saw that the change in her seemed to go further. The clear, strong, holiday sunshine showed up lines and sags and disfiguring marks that I had never noticed before. I imagine it is a bad moment in any close relationship, however inevitable. I admit that I was quite overcome by it. So sorry did I

feel for both of us, and for everybody in the world, that I wept like a raincloud into Ursula's changed hair that would never, could never, be the same again; nor Ursula, therefore, either.

I do not think we should be ashamed to weep at the proper times, or do anything to stop it, provided that we are not in some crowd of people; but that time it did little to make me feel better. Instead, I kept on noticing more and more wrong with Ursula all day; not only with her looks and youthfulness, but with her spirits and behaviour also. She just did not seem the same girl, and I became more and more confused and unsure of myself. I am fairly easily made unsure of myself at the best of times, though almost always I succeed in concealing the fact, apparently to the general satisfaction.

And then, to top it all, when we reached home, we found the scene of ruin I have just referred to. It was quite late, well past eleven o'clock, I am certain; and the very first thing we found was that the lock to the front door had been forced. The young thugs had not even done the usual trick with a piece of plastic. They had simply bashed the lock right through. Of course to do as much damage as possible is always their precise idea—pretty well their only idea, as far as one can see. They had done themselves proud in every room of Ursula's and my home—and done their parents and teachers proud too, and indeed their entire generation. In particular, they had stopped all the clocks—*all* of them (Ursula soon made sure of that); and smashed several of them into pieces that could never be humpty-dumptied again and had to constitute the first clock burial in our garden. Early the next morning I looked after that. The thugs proved to have ripped down the different electric meters—something that is not always too easy to do. I can still hear—and, in a manner, even see—Ursula pitter-pattering in her high heels from room to room in the darkness, and uttering little gasps and screams as she discovered what had been done to her precious clocks, one by one. I doubt whether I shall ever forget it. In fact, I am sure I never shall, as it gave me the first clear and conscious inkling of what was afoot in my home and married life.

After that, the funny man, the expert, was in and out the whole time—trying to make good, to replace. I was hardly in any position to demur, and I am

sure his visits were many, but I never saw him once, nor have I ever tracked down anyone who did at that particular time—or who will admit to it.

I even sank so low as to *ask* Wally Walters.

I stopped him one bright afternoon as he sauntered along the road which goes past the new bus sheds. I had even taken trouble to put myself in his way. He was wearing pale mauve trousers, and a crimson silk shirt, open almost to his navel, showing the smooth skin of his chest, the colour of peanut butter. I had crossed the road to him.

"Wally," I said, though I have always avoided calling him by that name. "That funny fellow. You remember?"

He nodded with a slowness that was obviously affected. Already his soft gaze was on me.

"With all those clocks?" I went on.

"Of course," said Wally Walters.

"Well," I continued with too much of a gasp. "Have you seen him again?"

"Not I, said the fly. With my little eye I see nothing again. Never the same thing twice. I should remember that for yourself, Joe. It's useful."

He paused, very calm, while I fumed. The weather was hot and I was perspiring in any case. I felt a fool, and that was too plainly what I was meant to feel.

"Anything else, Joe? Just while the two of us are alone together?"

"No, thank you."

And he strolled off, to nowhere very much, one knew; but cool as an entire old-fashioned milk dairy.

It was not an encouraging conversation, and it played its part in further damping down a curiosity that I did not wholly want satisfied in any case. I

continued enquiring as opportunity seemed to offer, but in most cases the response suggested only that the other party was embarrassed by my attitude. I failed to find any outside trace of the man who was now visiting my home so frequently; just as the police had failed to find a trace of the young thugs.

Not that there was the very slightest doubt about the man being constantly there. Once, for example, he did an extraordinary thing. I came home to find that he had allowed one of the clocks to drop its heavy weight on to the floor so sharply that it had made a hole right through the boards. Somehow the weight itself had been extricated before I arrived, and re-suspended; but the hole inevitably remained, and as poor Ursula was desperately insistent upon its being repaired as soon as possible, I had to spend most of the next morning standing over Chivers, our local jobbing builder's man, while he worked, and exercising all of my authority over him.

"Aren't the clocks rather getting out of control?" I asked Ursula sarcastically.

She made no answer, and did not seem to like what I had said.

In general, by now I was avoiding all sarcasm, indeed all comment of any kind. It had become fairly obvious that Ursula was not at all herself.

She had completely failed to recapture her former brightness—and despite the attentions of our curious visitor, as I could not help thinking to myself. And despite the fact too that his ministrations would appear to have gone well, in that what could be repaired had been, and that replacements were all too numerous and clamorous everywhere, assuredly for me. None the less, Ursula looked like a rag, and when it came to her behaviour, that seemed to consist largely in her wringing her hands—literally, wringing her hands. She seemed able to walk from room to room by the hour just wringing her hands. I had never before in my life knowingly seen it done at all, and I found it frightful to watch. And, what was more, when the time came round for our next regular weekend in a country hotel, Ursula refused to go. More accurately, she said, very sadly, that "it would be no use her going".

Naturally, I talked and talked and talked to her. It was a moment of crisis, a point of no return, if ever there was one; but I knew all the time that this was nothing, nothing at all, by comparison with what inescapably and most mysteriously lay ahead for me.

Ursula and I never went away together again. Indeed, we never did anything much, except have odd, low-toned disagreements, seldom about anything that could be defined. I had heard often of a home never being the same again once the burglars have been through it; and that replacements can never equal the originals. But Ursula seemed so wan and ill the whole time, so totally unlike what she had been since I first met her, that I began to suspect there was something else.

It was hard not to suppose there had been some sort of quarrel with the other man, though not so easy to guess what about. Indeed, there seemed to me to be some slight, independent evidence of a row. Previously I was always noticing changes in the positioning and the spit-and-polish of the different clocks; to say nothing of the completely new ones that materialized from time to time. Now, for months, I noticed no changes among the clocks at all, only a universal, stagnant droopiness; and certainly there were no arrivals. I wondered whether the tall fellow had not been peeved about our recent mishap, and perhaps indicated that while he was prepared to put all to rights that once, yet he must make it clear that he could not so do again. He might have taken a critical view of our being away from the house at the time (and, in any case, had we not spent much of that time merely sprawling about in bed?). That might well be why we had never since been out of the house for a single night, nor looked like being ever again out of it. But of course Ursula and I never said one word to each other about any aspect of all this.

That allowed me the more scope for surmise, and I knew quite well that I had more or less accurately assessed much of what was up. I have often noticed in life that we never really *learn* anything—learn for the first time, I mean. We know everything already, everything that we, as individuals, are capable of knowing, or fit to know; all that other people do for us, at the best, is to remind us, to give our brains a little twist from one set of preoccupations to a slightly different set.

In the end, Ursula seemed so run down that I felt she should see a doctor, though my opinion of doctors is low. I know what goes on in my own profession, and see no reason why the medical profession should be any different, by and large. All the same, something had to be done; and in circumstances such as I now found myself in, one clutches. But Ursula positively refused to visit our Doctor Tweed, even though I begged her.

Our little talk on the subject came at the end of a week—at least a week—when we had hardly spoken together at all, let alone done anything else. Ursula was all a dirty white colour; her hair was now so streaked and flecked that everyone would notice it at once; and she was plainly losing weight. She had given up any attempt to look pretty, about which previously she had been so careful, so that I loved her for it. And, as I say, she hardly let fall a word, do what I would. Evening after evening, we just sat hopelessly together listening to the clocks striking all over the house.

Ursula had always had much the same attitude to doctors as mine, which was yet another reason why I loved her. But now that made it difficult to press her on the subject.

She simply said "No," smiled a little, and shook her pretty head. Yes, a pretty head it still was for me, despite changes.

I put my arms round her and kissed her. I knelt at her feet, wept in her lap, and implored her. She still said "No, no," but no longer smiling, no longer moving at all.

So I thought the best thing—the only thing—was to visit Tweed myself.

Of course, it did no good. Tweed simply took his stand upon the official line that he could say nothing without first "examining the patient" herself. When I repeated that she refused to be "examined" (and, truly, I found it hard to criticize her attitude), he actually said with a smile, "Then, Joe, I suspect that she's not really very ill." Tweed calls me Joe, though I call him Doctor Tweed. Of course he is considerably older than I am, and I've known him since I was a boy. I should find it difficult to speak the same language as these new young doctors. I come between the generations, as it were.

I tried to remonstrate. "After all, I am her husband," I cried, "and I'm very worried about her."

"I could examine *you*" said Tweed, fixing me with his eye, only half-humorously.

Obviously it was out of the question even to attempt a description of the strange and oppressive background to it all.

"She's in the grip of some outside power, and it's nearly killing her," I cried. It was all I could get out, and of course it sounded ludicrous.

"Now, Joe," said Tweed, professionally conciliating, but firmly silencing me all the same. "Now, Joe. You make me think that I *ought* to examine you. But I've a better idea. Suppose I make a joint appointment for the two of you, so that I can examine you both?b I'm sure your wife will agree to that."

"She won't," I said, like a stubborn schoolboy.

"Oh, you husbands! Have you no authority left? Joe, I'm ashamed of you."

And I think there was a bit more between the two of us along the same lines, but I know that Tweed ended by saying: "Now, of course, I'll see your wife. Indeed, I'd *like* to, Joe, You might tell her that. Then just ring for an appointment almost any day, except Tuesday or Friday."

As I drove away, the idea occurred to me of consulting a quack, a proper quack—one of those people who are not on the medical register, and of whom in every company there are always some who speak so highly.

Then I thought that a consultation with a priest might be another possibility.

So as I wove my way home in the car, I was meditating—though fretting might be a better word—upon which priest or parson I could consult. The difficulty was, of course, that Ursula and I belonged to different faiths, Pope John or no Pope John; and that I had always been excluded from Ursula's creed as fully as from her life with the clocks and their overseer. Moreover,

as far as I could see, she had largely allowed the matter to lapse for some considerable time. Ursula's official faith was probably most incompatible with that other preoccupation of hers. And, what is more, I myself was on little more than affable nodding terms with our Church of England vicar. I subscribed to things, and I had a regular classified advertisement in the monthly parish magazine, but that was about all. A home where the religions are mixed always presents problems. And, finally, I could not see an appeal to Ursula to confide in her confessor as likely to achieve more than my appeal to her to confide in Tweed. Ursula was locked up within herself, and the key had either been thrown away or entrusted to one who no longer seemed to be visiting us.

Far from easing my mind in any way, my interview with Tweed had applied a new twist to my torture, and soon my last and desperate expedient of resorting to a priest had begun to seem hopeless. I had so little knowledge of what a priest could be *expected* to do, even, as it were, at the best. By the time I reached home, I was so wrought up as to be quite unfit for driving. Though I never, if I can help it, go more than steadily, I had by then no right, properly speaking, to be on the road at all.

I noticed as I chugged past the clock outside the new multiple store (it is a polygonal clock with letters making a slogan instead of figures), that it was past three o'clock, even though I had not stopped for any kind of lunch. My idea was that I would look in on Ursula fairly quickly, and then make tracks for my neglected office. Ursula knew that I had been to see Tweed, so that something would have to be invented.

Ursula no longer seemed to appreciate the little ceremony of opening the front door to me, so nowadays I used my own key. As soon as I had opened the door that afternoon, the first indication of chaos lay spread before me.

In the hallway had stood, since Ursula and her friend put it there, a tall clock so bedizened and twisted with carved brown woodwork as to have lost all definable outline or shape. Now this object had been toppled, so that its parts and guts were strewn across the hallway floor. I hurriedly shut the outer door, but then stood for several moments taking in the details of the ruin. The entire head of the clock, containing the main part of the mechanism and the dial, had almost broken away from the rest, so that the

effect was as if the clock had been strangled. And all over the hallway mat were disgusting pink and yellow pieces from its inside that I knew nothing of.

It was a revolting sight as well as an alarming one and, tense as I had been before even entering the house, I was very nearly sick. But I took a final pull on myself and plunged into the living-room, of which the door from the hallway was already open.

This time there was devastation of another kind: all the clocks had disappeared.

That morning, the last time I had been in the room, there had been no fewer than six of them, and had I not often counted them—in that particular room, at least? Now there were only marks on the wallpaper, faint shadows of all the different heights and breadths—except that, even more mysteriously, there were a few mechanical parts, quite obviously clock parts, scattered across the roses in the carpet. I think they are roses, but I am no botanist.

I gingerly picked up one or two of the scattered bits, small springs and plates and ratchets, and I stood there examining them as they lay in my hand. Then I shouted out "Ursula, Ursula, Ursula," at the top of my bawl.

There was no response from Ursula, nor in my heart had I expected one. But my shouting instantly brought into action Mrs Webber, Mrs Brightside, and Mrs Delft, who had undoubtedly been keenly awaiting some such development. They are three of our neighbours: one each from the houses on either side, and the third from the house immediately opposite. I had been grimly aware for a long time that events in our home must have given them much to talk about and think about. Now they were all three at my front door.

I cannot hope to separate out their mingled narratives.

During the dinner time hour that day, a black van had stopped at our gate. All the ladies were most emphatic about the size of the van: "bigger than an ordinary pantechnicon," one of them went so far as to claim, and the other two agreed with her on the instant. But into this vast vehicle went from my

abode only clocks—as far as the ladies could observe; but clock after clock after clock; until the ladies could only disbelieve their eyes. Ursula had done most of the carrying, they said, and "a great struggle" it had been; while the man who came with the van merely stood by, to the growing indignation of my three informants. But then came the heavier pieces, the grandfathers and chiming colossi, and at that point the man did deign to lend a hand, indeed seemed perfectly capable of mastering the huge objects all by himself, entirely alone, without noticeable effort. "He was a great big fellow," said one of the ladies. "As big as his van," agreed another, more awed than facetious.

"How long did it go on?" I put in.

"It seemed like hours and hours, with poor Mrs Richardson doing so much of the work, and having such a struggle."

"Perhaps the man had to look after the stowing?"

"No," they all agreed. "Until near the end he just stood there, twiddling his thumbs." Then two of them added separately, "Just twiddling his thumbs."

At which a silence fell.

I was forced to put the next question into words. "What happened in the end?" I enquired.

In the end, Ursula had mounted the big black van beside the driver and been driven away.

"In which direction?" I asked quite feebly.

They pointed one of the ways the road went.

"We all thought it so strange that we dashed in to one another at once."

I nodded.

"It was as if Mrs Richardson had to fight with the clocks. As if they just didn't want to go. And all the time the man just stood there watching her

struggle."

"What do you mean by struggle?" I asked. "You mean that some of the clocks were very heavy and angular?"

"Not *only* that," the same lady replied, perhaps bolder with her words than the others. "No, it was just as if the clocks—or some of the clocks—were fighting back." She stopped, but then looked up at the other two. "Wasn't it?" she said in appeal to them. "Didn't you think it was like that?"

"I must say it looked like it," said one of the others. The third lady expressed no view.

"And did you get the same impression with the big clocks?" I asked the lady who had taken the initiative.

But this time they all replied at once: No, the man having weighed in at that stage, the big clocks had been "mastered" at once, and single-handed.

"What are you going to do?" asked a lady. One can never believe that such a question will be put, but always it is.

I am practised in social situations and after a moment's thought, I produced a fairly good response. "My wife must have decided to sell her collection of clocks. I am not altogether surprised. I myself have been thinking for some time that we had rather too many for the size of the house."

That made the ladies hesitate for a moment in their turn.

Then one of them said, "You'll find it quieter now." She was obviously meaning to be pleasant and sympathetic.

"Yes," I said, smiling, as one does in the office, and when with clients generally. "Quieter for all of us, I suspect." I knew perfectly well how far the din from Ursula's clocks had carried.

"Not that those clocks wanted to leave," repeated the lady who had just now taken the initiative. "You and Mrs Richardson must have given them a good home," she smiled sentimentally.

The other ladies plainly thought this was a point in no need of repetition, and the slight embarrassment engendered facilitated our farewells.

I closed the front door, shot the bolts, and returned to the living-room. Presumably, the spare parts which nestled among the roses on the carpet, had fallen off during Ursula's "struggle". And, presumably, the hideous monster I had just stepped across and through in the hallway had successfully defied even Ursula's thumb-twiddling friend; had defeated him, though at the cost of its own life.

I traversed the entire house, step by step. Every one of the clocks had gone, apart from a scrap or section here and there on the floor; all the clocks but three. Three clocks survived, two of them intact. As well as the monster in the hallway, there remained Ursula's small travelling clock that had accompanied us on our honeymoon. She appeared to have delved it out from its hiding place—and then done no more with it. I found it on our dressing-table, going but not exactly ticking. It never had exactly ticked, of course. But I wondered if it had ever stopped going, even when hidden away for years. There was also the clock that had been left to my mother in old Mr Rosenberg's will: a foursquare, no nonsense, British Midlands model that had always gained at least five minutes in every two hours, so that it was as good as useless for actually telling the time. My mother had fiddled endlessly with the so-called regulator, and I too in my late adolescence, but I have never found the regulators of clocks to give one any more control than do those press-buttons at pedestrian crossings.

I stumped wearily round from room to room and up and down the stairs, assembling all the clock parts into a compact heap on the rosy living-room carpet. I went about it carefully, taking my time; and then I placed the two surviving and intact clocks on top of the heap. Next I unlocked a drawer in my little dressing-room or sanctum and got out my club.

My club was a largely home-made object that had come in remarkably useful for a variety of purposes, including self-protection, during my schooldays. A number of the chaps had things somewhat like it. Since then, I had never had occasion to use my club, though I had always thought that there might again be moments for which it would be exactly the thing—

moments, for example, where my home might be invaded from outside at a time when I was within to defend it.

I staggered downstairs once more, worn through to the bone; but not so worn, even then, that I lacked the force to club the heap on the living-room carpet to smithereens, whatever—exactly—they may be. I included the two intact clocks in the carnage. Indeed, I set them in the forefront of the battle. There are no beautiful clocks. Everything to do with time is hideous.

Then I edged the shattered bits into dustsheets and, while the neighbours were possibly taking a rest from watching me, I carried through my second clock burial in the back garden.

When, for three days, there was no sign of or word from my wife, I thought it wise to notify the police.

And now whole weeks have passed.

O Ursula, Ursula.

Pages From A Young Girl's Journal (1973)

3 OCTOBER. PADUA—FERRARA—RAVENNA. We've reached Ravenna only four days after leaving that horrid Venice. And all in a hired carriage! I feel sore and badly bitten too. It was the same yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that. I wish I had someone to talk to. This evening, Mamma did not appear for dinner at all. Papa just sat there saying nothing and looking at least 200 years old instead of only 100, as he usually does. I wonder how old he *really* is? But it's no good wondering. We shall never know, or at least I shan't. I often think Mamma *does* know, or very nearly. I wish Mamma were someone I could talk to, like Caroline's Mamma. I often used to think that Caroline and her Mamma were more like sisters together, though of course I could never say such a thing. But then Caroline is pretty and gay, whereas I am pale and quiet. When I came up here to my room after dinner, I just sat in front of the long glass and stared and stared. I must have done it for half an hour or perhaps an hour. I only rose to my feet when it had become quite dark outside.

I don't like my room. It's much too big and there are only two wooden chairs, painted in greeny-blue with gold lines, or once painted like that. I hate having to lie on my bed when I should prefer to sit and everyone knows how bad it is for the back. Besides, this bed, though it's enormous, seems to be as hard as when the earth's dried up in summer. Not that the earth's like that here. Far from it. The rain has never stopped since we left Venice. Never once. Quite unlike what Miss Gisborne said before we set out from my dear, dear Derbyshire. This bed really is *huge*. It would take at least eight people my size. I don't like to think about it. I've just remembered: it's the third of the month so that we've been gone exactly half a year. What a lot of places I have been to in that time—or been through! Already I've quite forgotten some of them. I never properly saw them in any case. Papa has his own ideas and one thing I'm sure of is that they are quite unlike other people's ideas. To me the whole of Padua is just a man on a horse—stone or bronze, I suppose, but I don't even know which. The whole

of Ferrara is a huge palace—castle—fortress that simply frightened me, so that I didn't *want* to look. It was as big as this bed—in its own way, of course. And those were two large, famous towns I have visited this very week. Let alone where I was perhaps two months ago! What a farce! as Caroline's Mamma always says. I wish she were here now and Caroline too. No one ever hugged and kissed me and made things happy as they do.

The contessa has at least provided me with no fewer than twelve candles. I found them in one of the drawers. I suppose there's nothing else to do but read—except perhaps to say one's prayers. Unfortunately, I finished all the books I brought with me long ago, and it's so difficult to buy any new ones, especially in English. However, I managed to purchase two very long ones by Mrs Radcliffe before we left Venice. Unfortunately, though there are twelve candles, there are only two candlesticks, both broken, like everything else. Two candles *should* be enough, but all they seem to do is make the room look even larger and darker. Perhaps they are not-very-good foreign candles. I noticed that they seemed very dirty and discoloured in the drawer. In fact, one of them looked quite black. That one must have lain in the drawer a very long time. By the way, there is a framework hanging from the ceiling in the middle of the room. I cannot truthfully describe it as a chandelier: perhaps as the ghost of a chandelier. In any case, it is a long way from even the foot of the bed. They do have the most *enormous* rooms in these foreign houses where we stay. Just as if it were very warm the whole time, which it certainly is not. What a farce!

As a matter of fact, I'm feeling quite cold at this moment, even though I'm wearing my dark-green woollen dress that in Derbyshire saw me through the whole of last winter. I wonder if I should be any warmer *in* bed? It is something I can never make up my mind about. Miss Gisborne always calls me "such a chilly mortal". I see I have used the present tense. I wonder if that is appropriate in the case of Miss Gisborne? Shall I ever see Miss Gisborne again? I mean in *this* life, of course.

Now that six days have passed since I have made an entry in this journal, I find that I am putting down *everything*, as I always do once I make a start. It is almost as if nothing horrid could happen to me as long as I keep on

writing. That is simply silly, but I sometimes wonder whether the silliest things are not often the truest.

I write down words on the page, but what do I say? Before we started, everyone told me that, whatever else I did, I *must* keep a journal, a travel journal. I do not think this a travel journal at all. I find that when I am travelling with Papa and Mamma, I seem hardly to look at the outside world. Either we are lumbering along, with Papa and Mamma naturally in the places from which something can be seen, or at least from which things can be best seen; or I find that I am alone in some great vault of a bedroom for hours and hours and hours, usually quite unable to go to sleep, sometimes for the whole night. I should see so much more if I could sometimes walk about the different cities on my own—naturally, I do not mean at night. I wish that were possible. Sometimes I really hate being a girl. Even Papa cannot hate my being a girl more than I do sometimes.

And then when there *is* something to put down, it always seems to be the same thing! For example, here we are in still another of these households to which Papa always seems to have an entrée. Plainly it is very wicked of me, but I sometimes wonder *why* so many people should want to know Papa, who is usually so silent and disagreeable, and always so old! Perhaps the answer is simple enough: it is that they never meet him—or Mamma—or me. We drive up, Papa gives us all over to the major-domo or someone, and the family never sets eyes on us, because the family is never at home. These foreign families seem to have terribly many houses and always to be living in another of them. And when one of the family *does* appear, he or she usually seems to be almost as old as Papa and hardly able to speak a word of English. I think I have a pretty voice, though it's difficult to be quite sure, but I deeply wish I had worked harder at learning foreign languages. At least—the trouble is that Miss Gisborne is so bad at teaching them. I must say *that* in my own defence, but it doesn't help much now. I wonder how Miss Gisborne would be faring if she were in this room with me? Not much better than I am, if you ask me.

I have forgotten to say, though, that this is one of the times when we *are* supposed to be meeting the precious family; though, apparently, it consists only of two people, the contessa and her daughter. Sometimes I feel that I

have already seen enough women without particularly wanting to meet any new ones, whatever their ages. There's something rather monotonous about women—unless, of course, they're like Caroline and her Mamma, which none of them are, or could be. So far the contessa and her daughter have not appeared. I don't know why not, though no doubt Papa knows. I am told that we are to meet them both tomorrow. I expect very little. I wonder if it will be warm enough for me to wear my green satin dress instead of my green woollen dress? Probably not.

And this is the town where the great, the immortal Lord Byron lives in sin and wildness! Even Mamma has spoken of it several times. Not that this melancholy house is actually *in* the town. It is a villa at some little distance away from it, though I do not know in which direction, and I am sure that Mamma neither knows nor cares. It seemed to me that after we passed through the town this afternoon, we travelled on for fifteen or twenty minutes. Still, to be even in the same *region* as Lord Byron must somewhat move even the hardest heart; and my heart, I am very sure, is not hard in the least.

I find that I have been scribbling away for nearly an hour. Miss Gisborne keeps on saying that I am too prone to the insertion of unnecessary hyphens, and that it is a weakness. If a weakness it is, I intend to cherish it.

I know that an hour has passed because there is a huge clock somewhere that sounds every quarter. It must be a *huge* clock because of the noise it makes, and because everything abroad *is* huge.

I am colder than ever and my arms are quite stiff. But I must drag off my clothes somehow, blow out the candles, and insinuate my tiny self into this enormous, frightening bed. I do hate the lumps you get all over your body when you travel abroad, and so much hope I don't get many more during the night. Also I hope I don't start feeling thirsty, as there's no water of any kind, let alone water safe to drink.

Ah, Lord Byron, living out there in riot and wickedness! It is impossible to forget him. I wonder what he would think of *me*? I do hope there are not too many biting things in this room.

4 October. What a surprise! The contessa has said it will be quite in order for me to go for short walks in the town, provided I have my maid with me; and when Mamma at once pointed out that I had no maid, offered the services of her own! To think of this happening the very day after I wrote down in this very journal that it could never happen! I am now quite certain that it would have been perfectly correct for me to walk about the other towns too. I daresay that Papa and Mamma suggested otherwise only because of the difficulty about the maid. Of course I *should* have a maid, just as Mamma should have a maid too and Papa a man, and just as we should all have a proper carriage of our own, with our crest on the doors! If it was that we were too poor, it would be humiliating. As we are not too poor (I am sure we are not), it is farcical. In any case, Papa and Mamma went on making a fuss, but the contessa said we had now entered the States of the Church, and were, therefore, all living under the special beneficence of God. The contessa speaks English very well and even knows the English *idioms*, as Miss Gisborne calls them.

Papa screwed up his face when the contessa mentioned the States of the Church, as I knew he would. Papa remarked several times while we were on the way here that the Papal States, as he calls them, are the most misgoverned in Europe and that it was not only as a Protestant that he said so. I wonder. When Papa expresses opinions of that kind, they often seem to me to be just notions of his own, like his notions of the best way to travel. After the contessa had spoken as she did, I felt—very strongly—that it must be rather beautiful to be ruled directly by the Pope and his cardinals. Of course, the cardinals and even the Pope are subject to error, as are our own bishops and rectors, all being but men, as Mr Biggs-Hartley continually emphasizes at home; but, all the same, they simply *must* be nearer to God than the sort of people who rule us in England. I do not think Papa can be depended upon to judge such a question.

I am determined to act upon the contessa's kind offer. Miss Gisborne says that though I am a pale little thing, I have very much a will of my own. Here will be an opportunity to prove it. There may be certain difficulties because the contessa's maid can only speak Italian; but when the two of us shall be alone together, it is I who shall be mistress and she who will be

maid, and nothing can change that. I have seen the girl. She is a pretty creature, apart from the size of her nose.

Today it has been wet, as usual. This afternoon we drove round Ravenna in the contessa's carriage: a proper carriage for once, with arms on the doors and a footman as well as the coachman. Papa has paid off our hired coach. I suppose it has lumbered away back to Fusina, opposite to Venice. I expect I can count upon our remaining in Ravenna for a week. That seems to be Papa's usual sojourn in one of our major stopping places. It is not very long, but often it is quite long enough, the way we live.

This afternoon we saw Dante's Tomb, which is simply by the side of the street, and went into a big church with the Throne of Neptune in it, and then into the Tomb of Galla Placidia, which is blue inside, and very beautiful. I was on the alert for any hint of where Lord Byron might reside, but it was quite unnecessary to speculate, because the contessa almost shouted it out as we rumbled along one of the streets: "The Palazzo Guiccioli. See the netting across the bottom of the door to prevent Lord Byron's animals from straying."

"Indeed, indeed," said Papa, looking out more keenly than he had at Dante's Tomb. No more was said, because, though both Papa and Mamma had more than once alluded to Lord Byron's present way of life so that I should be able to understand things that might come up in conversation, yet neither the contessa nor Papa and Mamma knew how much I might really understand. Moreover, the little contessina was in the carriage, sitting upon a cushion on the floor at her Mamma's feet, making five of us in all, foreign carriages being as large as everything else foreign; and I daresay *she* knew nothing at all, sweet little innocent.

"Contessina" is only a kind of nickname or *sobriquet*, used by the family and the servants. The contessina is really a contessa: in foreign noble families, if one person is a duke, then all the other men seem to be dukes also, and all the women duchesses. It is very confusing and nothing like such a good arrangement as ours, where there is only one duke and one duchess to each family. I do not know the little contessina's age. Most foreign girls look far older than they really are, whereas most of our girls look younger. The contessa is *very* slender, a veritable sylph. She has an

olive complexion, with no blemish of any kind. People often write about "olive complexions": the contessina really has one. She has absolutely enormous eyes, the shape of broad beans, and not far off that in colour; but she never uses them to look at anyone. She speaks so little and often has such an empty, lost expression that one might think her more than slightly simple; but I do not think she is. Foreign girls are raised quite differently from the way our girls are raised. Mamma frequently refers to this, pursing her lips. I must admit that I cannot see myself finding in the contessina a friend, pretty though she is in her own way, with feet about half the size of mine or Caroline's.

When foreign girls grow up to become women, they usually continue, poor things, to look older than they are. I am sure this applies to the contessa. The contessa has been very kind to me—in the few hours that I have so far known her—and even seems to be a little sorry for me—as, indeed, I am for her. But I do not understand the contessa. Where was she last night? Is the little contessina her only child? What has become of her husband? Is it because he is dead that she seems—and looks—so sad? Why does she want to live in such a big house—it is called a villa, but one might think it a palazzo—when it is all falling to bits, and much of it barely even furnished? I should like to ask Mamma these questions, but I doubt whether she would have the right answers, or perhaps any answers.

The contessa did appear for dinner this evening, and even the little contessina. Mamma was there too: in that frock I dislike. It really is the wrong kind of red—especially for Italy, where *dark* colours seem to be so much worn. The evening was better than last evening; but then it could hardly have been worse. (Mr Biggs-Hartley says we should never say that: things can *always* be worse.) It was not a *good* evening. The contessa was trying to be quite gay, despite her own obvious trouble, whatever that is; but neither Papa nor Mamma know how to respond and I know all too well that I myself am better at thinking about things than at casting a spell in company. What I like most is just a few friends I know really well and whom I can truly trust and love. Alas, it is long since I have had even one such to clasp by the hand. Even letters seem mostly to lose themselves en route, and I can hardly wonder; supposing people are still bothering to write them in the first place, needless to say, which it is difficult to see why they

should be after all this time. When dinner was over, Papa and Mamma and the contessa played an Italian game with both playing cards and dice. The servants had lighted a fire in the salone and the contessina sat by it doing nothing and saying nothing. If given a chance, Mamma would have remarked that "the child should have been in bed long ago", and I am sure she should. The contessa wanted to teach me the game, but Papa said at once that I was too young, which is absolutely farcical. Later in the evening, the contessa, after playing a quite long time with Papa and Mamma, said that tomorrow she would put her foot down (the contessa knows so many such expressions that one would swear she must have *lived* in England) and would *insist* on my learning. Papa screwed his face up and Mamma pursed her lips in the usual way. I had been doing needlework, which I shall never like nor see any point in when servants can always do it for us; and I found that I was thinking many deep thoughts. And then I noticed that a small tear was slowly falling down the contessa's face. Without thinking, I sprang up; but then the contessa smiled, and I sat down. One of my deep thoughts was that it is not so much particular disasters that make people cry, but something always there in life itself, something that a light falls on when we are trying to enjoy ourselves in the company of others.

I must admit that the horrid lumps are going down. I certainly do not seem to have acquired any more, which is an advantage when compared with what happened every night in Dijon, that smelly place. But I wish I had a more cheerful room, with better furniture, though tonight I have succeeded in bringing to bed one of our bottles of mineral water and even a glass from which to drink it. It is only the Italian mineral water, of course, which Mamma says may be very little safer than the ordinary water; but as all the ordinary water seems to come from the dirty wells one sees down the side streets, I think that Mamma exaggerates. I admit, however, that it is not like the bottled water one buys in France. How farcical to have to buy water in a bottle, anyway! All the same, there are some things that I have grown to *like* about foreign countries; perhaps even to prefer. It would never do to let Papa and Mamma hear me talk in such a way. I often wish I were not so sensitive, so that the rooms I am given and things of that kind did not matter so much. And yet Mamma is more sensitive about the water than I am! I am sure it is not so *important*. It can't be. To me it is *obvious* that Mamma is

less sensitive than I am, where *important* things are concerned. My entire life is based on that obvious fact; my real life, that is.

I rather wish the contessina would invite me to share *her* room, because I think she is sensitive in the same way that I am. But perhaps the little girl sleeps in the contessa's room. I should not really mind that. I do not *hate* or even dislike the little contessina. I expect she already has troubles herself. But Papa and Mamma would never agree to it anyway, and now I have written all there is to write about this perfectly ordinary, but somehow rather odd, day. In this big cold room, I can hardly move with chilliness.

5 October. When I went in to greet Mamma this morning, Mamma had the most singular news. She told me to sit down (Mamma and Papa have more chairs in their rooms than I have, and more of other things too), and then said that there was to be a party! Mamma spoke as though it would be a dreadful ordeal, which it was impossible for us to avoid; and she seemed to take it for granted that I should receive the announcement in the same way. I do not know what I really thought about it. It is true that I have never enjoyed a party yet (not that I have been present at many of them); but all day I have been aware of feeling different inside myself, lighter and swifter in some way, and by this evening I cannot but think it is owing to the knowledge that a party lies before me. After all, foreign parties may be different from parties at home, and probably are. I keep pointing that out to myself. This particular party will be given by the contessa, who, I feel sure, knows more about it than does Mamma. If she does, it will not be the only thing that the contessa knows more about than Mamma.

The party is to be the day after tomorrow. While we were drinking our coffee and eating our panini (always very flaky and powdery in Italy), Mamma asked the contessa whether she was sure there would be time enough for the preparations. But the contessa only smiled—in a very polite way, of course. It is probably easier to do things quickly in Italy (when one really wants to, that is), because everyone has so many servants. It is hard to believe that the contessa has much money, but she seems to keep more servants than we do, and, what is more, they behave more like slaves than like servants, quite unlike our Derbyshire keel-the-pots. Perhaps it is simply that everyone is so fond of the contessa. That I should entirely understand.

Anyway, preparations for the party have been at a high pitch all day, with people hanging up banners, and funny smells from the kitchen quarters. Even the Bath House at the far end of the formal garden (it is said to have been built by the Byzantines) has had the spiders swept out and been populated with cooks, perpetrating I know not what. The transformation is quite bewildering. I wonder when Mamma first knew of what lay ahead? Surely it must at least have been before we went to bed last night?

I feel I should be vexed that a new dress is so impracticable. A train of seamstresses would have to work day and night for 48 hours, as in the fairy tales. I should like that (who would not?), but I am not at all sure that I should be provided with a new dress even if whole weeks were available in which to make it. Papa and Mamma would probably still agree that I had quite enough dresses already even if it were the Pope and his cardinals who were going to entertain me. All the same, I am not really vexed. I sometimes think that I am deficient in a proper interest in clothes, as Caroline's Mamma calls it. Anyway, I have learned from experience that new dresses are more often than not thoroughly disappointing. I keep reminding myself of that.

The other important thing today is that I have been out for my first walk in the town with the contessa's maid, Emilia. I just swept through what Papa had to say on the subject, as I had promised myself. Mamma was lying down at the time, and the contessa simply smiled her sweet smile and sent for Emilia to accompany me.

I must admit that the walk was not a *complete* success. I took with me our copy of Mr Grubb's *Handbook to Ravenna and Its Antiquities* (Papa could hardly say No, lest I do something far worse), and began looking places up on the map with a view to visiting them. I felt that this was the best way to start, and that, once started, I could wait to see what life would lay before me. I am often quite resolute when there is some specific situation to be confronted. The first difficulty was the quite long walk into Ravenna itself. Though it was nothing at all to me, and though it was not raining, Emilia soon made it clear that she was unaccustomed to walking a step. This could only have been an affectation, or rather pretension, because everyone knows that girls of that kind come from peasant families, where I am quite sure

they have to walk about all day, and much more than merely walk about. Therefore, I took no notice at all, which was made easier by my hardly understanding a word that Emilia actually said. I simply pushed and dragged her forward. Sure enough, she soon gave up all her pretences, and made the best of the situation. There were some rough carters on the road and large numbers of horrid children, but for the most part they stopped annoying us as soon as they saw who we were, and in any case it was as nothing to the roads into Derby, where they have lately taken to throwing stones at the passing carriages.

The next trouble was that Emilia was not in the least accustomed to what I had in mind when we reached Ravenna. Of course people do not go again and again to look at their own local antiquities, however old they may be; and least of all, I suspect, Italian people. When she was not accompanying her mistress, Emilia was used to going to town only for some precise purpose: to buy something, to sell something, or to deliver a letter. There was that in her attitude which made me think of the saucy girls in the old comedies: whose only work is to fetch and carry billets-doux, and sometimes to take the places of their mistresses, with their mistresses' knowledge or otherwise. I did succeed in visiting another of these Bath Houses, this one a public spectacle and called the Baptistry of the Orthodox, because it fell into Christian hands after the last days of the Romans, who built it. It was, of course, far larger than the Bath House in the contessa's garden, but in the interior rather dark and with a floor so uneven that it was difficult not to fall. There was also a horrible dead animal inside. Emilia began laughing, and it was quite plain what she was laughing at. She was striding about as if she were back on her mountains and the kind of thing she seemed to be suggesting was that if I proposed to walk all the way to the very heel or toe of Italy she was quite prepared to walk with me, and perhaps to walk ahead of me. As an English girl, I did not care for this, nor for the complete reversal of Emilia's original attitude, almost suggesting that she has a deliberate and impertinent policy of keeping the situation between us under her own control. So, as I have said, the walk was not a complete success. All the same, I have made a start. It is obvious that the world has more to offer than would be likely to come my way if I were to spend my whole life creeping about with Papa at one side of me and Mamma at the other. I shall think about how best to deal with

Emilia now that I better understand her ways. I was not in the least tired when we had walked back to the villa. I despise girls who get tired, quite as much as Caroline despises them.

Believe it or not, Mamma was still lying down. When I went in, she said that she was resting in preparation for the party. But the party is not until the day after tomorrow. Poor dear Mamma might have done better not to have left England in the first place! I must take great care that I am not like that when I reach the same time of life and am married, as I suppose I shall be. Looking at Mamma in repose, it struck me that she would still be quite pretty if she did not always look so tired and worried. Of course she was once far prettier than I am now. I know that well. I, alas, am not really pretty at all. I have to cultivate other graces, as Miss Gisborne puts it.

I saw something unexpected when I was going upstairs to bed. The little contessina had left the salone before the rest of us and, as usual, without a word. Possibly it was only I who saw her slip out, she went so quietly. I noticed that she did not return and supposed that, at her age, she was quite worn out. Assuredly, Mamma would have said so. But then when I myself was going upstairs, holding my candle, I saw for myself what had really happened. At the landing, as we in England should call it, there is in one of the corners an odd little closet or cabinet, from which two doors lead off, both locked, as I know because I have cautiously turned the handles for myself. In this corner, by the light of my candle, I saw the contessina, and she was being hugged by a man. I think it could only have been one of the servants, though I was not really able to tell. Perhaps I am wrong about that, but I am not wrong about it being the contessina. They had been there in complete darkness, and, what is more, they never moved a muscle as I came up the stairs and walked calmly along the passage in the opposite direction. I suppose they hoped I should fail to see them in the dimness. They must have supposed that no one would be coming to bed just yet. Or perhaps they were lost to all sense of time, as Mrs Radcliffe expresses it. I have very little notion of the contessina's age, but she often looks about twelve or even less. Of course I shall say nothing to anybody.

6 October. I have been thinking on and off all day about the differences between the ways we are supposed to behave and the ways we actually do

behave. And both are different from the ways in which God calls upon us to behave, and which we can never achieve whatever we do and however hard we apply ourselves, as Mr Biggs-Hartley always emphasizes. We seem, every one of us, to be at least three different people. And that's just to start with.

I am disappointed by the results of my little excursion yesterday with Emilia. I had thought that there was so much of which I was deprived by being a girl and so being unable to go about on my own, but now I am not sure that I have been missing anything. It is almost as if the nearer one approaches to a thing, the less it proves to be there, to exist at all. Apart, of course, from the bad smells and bad words and horrid rough creatures from which and from whom we women are supposed to be "shielded". But I am waxing metaphysical; against which Mr Biggs-Hartley regularly cautions us. I wish Caroline were with us. I believe I might feel quite differently about things if she were here to go about with me, just the two of us. Though, needless to say, it would make no difference to what the things truly were—or were not. It is curious that things should seem not to exist when visited with one person, and then to exist after all if visited with another person. Of course it is all just fancy, but what (I think at moments like this) is not?

I am so friendless and alone in this alien land. It occurs to me that I must have great inner strength to bear up as I do and to fulfil my duties with so little complaint. The contessa has very kindly given me a book of Dante's verses, with the Italian on one side and an English translation on the page opposite. She remarked that it would aid me to learn more of her language. I am not sure that it will. I have dutifully read through several pages of the book, and there is nothing in this world that I like more than reading, but Dante's ideas are so gloomy and complicated that I suspect he is no writer for a woman, certainly not for an English woman. Also his face frightens me, so critical and severe. After looking at his portrait, beautifully engraved at the beginning of the book, I begin to fear that I shall see that face looking over my shoulder as I sit gazing into the looking glass. No wonder Beatrice would have nothing to do with him. I feel that he was quite deficient in the graces that appeal to our sex. Of course one must not even hint such a thing to an Italian, such as the contessa, for to all Italians Dante is as sacred as

Shakespeare or Dr Johnson is to us. For once I am writing this during the afternoon. I suspect that I am suffering from ennui and, as that is a sin (even though only a minor one), I am occupying myself in order to drive it off. I know by now that I am much more prone to such lesser shortcomings as ennui and indolence than to such vulgarities as letting myself be embraced and kissed by a servant. And yet it is not that I feel myself wanting in either energy or passion. It is merely that I lack for anything or anyone worthy of such feelings, and refuse to spend them upon what is unworthy. But what a "merely" is that! How well I understand the universal ennui that possesses our neighbour, Lord Byron! I, a tiny slip of a girl, feel, at least in this particular, at one with the great poet! There might be consolation in the thought, were I capable of consolation. In any case, I am sure that there will be nothing more that is worth record before my eyes close tonight in slumber.

Later. I was wrong! After dinner tonight, it struck me simply to ask the contessa whether she had ever *met* Lord Byron. I suppose it might not be a thing she would proclaim unsolicited, either when Papa and Mamma were present, or, for reasons of delicacy, on one of the two rare occasions when she and I were alone; but I thought that I might now be sufficiently simpatica to venture a discreet enquiry.

I fear that I managed it very crudely. When Papa and Mamma had become involved in one of their arguments together, I walked across the room and sat down at the end of the sofa on which the contessa was reclining; and when she smiled at me and said something agreeable, I simply blurted out my question, quite directly. "Yes, *mia cara*" she replied, "I have met him, but we cannot invite him to our party because he is too political, and many people do not agree with his politics. Indeed, they have already led to several deaths; which some are reluctant to accept at the hands of a straniero, however eminent. "And of course it *was* the wonderful possibility of Lord Byron attending the contessa's party that *had been* at the back of my thoughts. Not for the first time, the contessa showed her fascinating insight into the minds of others—or assuredly into my mind.

7 October. The day of the party! It is quite early in the morning and the sun is shining as I have not seen it shine for some time. Perhaps it regularly

shines at this time of the day, when I am still asleep? "What you girls miss by not getting up!" as Caroline's Mamma always exclaims, though she is the most indulgent of parents. The trouble is that one *always* awakens early just when it is most desirable that one should slumber longest; as today, with the party before us. I am writing this now because I am *quite certain* that I shall be nothing but a tangle of nerves all day and, after everything is over, utterly spent and exhausted. So, for me, it always is with parties! I am glad that the day after tomorrow will be Sunday.

8 October. I met a man at the party who, I must confess, interested me very much; and, beside that, what matters, as Mrs Fremlinson enquires in *The Hopeful and the Despairing Heart*, *almost* my favourite of all books, as I truly declare?

Who could believe it? Just now, while I was still asleep, there was a knocking at my door, just loud enough to awaken me, but otherwise so soft and discreet, and there was the contessa *herself*, in the most beautiful negligée, half-rose-coloured and half-mauve, with a tray on which were things to eat and drink, a complete foreign breakfast, in fact! I must acknowledge that at that moment I could well have devoured a complete English breakfast, but what could have been kinder or more thoughtful on the part of the charming contessa? Her dark hair (but not so dark as with the majority of the Italians) had not yet been dressed, and hung about her beautiful, though sad, face, but I noticed that all her rings were on her fingers, flashing and sparkling in the sunshine. "Alas, *mia cara*, " she said, looking round the room, with its many deficiencies; "the times that were and the times that are." Then she actually bent over my face, rested her hand lightly on the top of my night-gown, and kissed me. "But how pale you look!" she continued. "You are white as a lily on the altar." I smiled. "I am English," I said, "and I lack strong colouring." But the contessa went on staring at me. Then she said: "The party has quite fatigued you?" She seemed to express it as a question, so I replied, with vigour: "Not in the least, I assure you, Contessa. It was the most beautiful evening of my life" (which was unquestionably the truth and no more than the truth). I sat up in the big bed and, so doing, saw myself in the glass. It was true that I *did* look pale, unusually pale. I was about to remark upon the earliness of the hour, when the contessa suddenly seemed to draw herself together with a gasp

and turn remarkably pale herself, considering the native hue of her skin. She stretched out her hand and pointed. She seemed to be pointing at the pillow behind me. I looked round, disconcerted by her demeanour; and I saw an irregular red mark upon the pillow, not a very large mark, but undoubtedly a mark of blood. I raised my hands to my throat. "*Dio Illustrissimo*!" cried out the contessa. "*Ell'e stregata*!" I know enough Italian, from Dante and from elsewhere, to be informed of what that means: "She is bewitched." I leapt out of bed and threw my arms round the contessa before she could flee, as she seemed disposed to do. I besought her to say more, but I was all the time fairly sure that she would not. Italians, even educated ones, still take the idea of "witchcraft" with a seriousness that to us seems unbelievable; and regularly fear even to speak of it. Here I knew by instinct that Emilia and her mistress would be at one. Indeed, the contessa seemed most uneasy at my mere embrace, but she soon calmed herself, and left the room saying, quite pleasantly, that she must have a word with my parents about me. She even managed to wish me "*Buon appetito*" of my little breakfast.

I examined my face and throat in the looking-glass and there, sure enough, was a small scar on my neck which explained everything—except, indeed, how I had come by such a mark, but for that the novelties, the rigours, and the excitements of last night's party would *entirely* suffice. One cannot expect to enter the tournament of love and emerge unscratched: and it is into the tournament that, as I thrill to think, I verily have made my way. I fear it is perfectly typical of the Italian manner of seeing things that a perfectly natural, and very tiny, mishap should have such a disproportionate effect upon the contessa. For myself, an English girl, the mark upon my pillow does not even disturb me. We must hope that it does not cast into screaming hysterics the girl whose duty it will be to change the linen.

If I look especially pale, it is partly because the very bright sunlight makes a contrast. I returned at once to bed and rapidly consumed every scrap and drop that the contessa had brought to me. I seemed quite weak from lack of sustenance, and indeed I have but the slenderest recollection of last night's fare, except that, naturally, I drank far more than on most previous days of my short life, probably more than on *any*.

And now I lie here in my pretty night-gown and nothing else, with my pen in my hand and the sun on my face, and think about *him*! I did not believe such people existed in the real world. I thought that such writers as Mrs Fremlinson and Mrs Radcliffe *improved* men, in order to reconcile their female readers to their lot, and to put their less numerous male readers in a good conceit of themselves. Caroline's Mamma and Miss Gisborne, in their quite different ways, have both indicated as much most clearly; and my own observation hitherto of the opposite sex has confirmed the opinion. But now I have actually met a man at whom even Mrs Fremlinson's finest creation does but hint! He is an Adonis! an Apollo! assuredly a god! Where he treads, sprouts asphodel!

The first romantic thing was that he was not properly presented to me—indeed, he was not presented at all. I know this was very incorrect, but it cannot be denied that it was very exciting. Most of the guests were dancing an old-fashioned *minuetto*, but as I did not know the steps, I was sitting at the end of the room with Mamma, when Mamma was suddenly overcome in some way and had to leave. She emphasized that she would be back in only a minute or two, but almost as soon as she had gone, *he* was standing there, quite as if he had emerged from between the faded tapestries that covered the wall or even from the tapestries themselves, except that he looked very far from faded, though later, when more candles were brought in for supper, I saw that he was older than I had at first supposed, with such a wise and experienced look as I have never seen on any other face.

Of course he had not only to speak to me at once, or I should have risen and moved away, but to *compel* me, with his eyes and words, to remain. He said something pleasant about my being the only rosebud in a garden otherwise autumnal, but I am not such a goose as never to have heard speeches like that before, and it was what he said next that made me fatally hesitate. He said (and never, *never* shall I forget his words): "As we are both visitants from a world that is not this one, we should know one another". It was so exactly what I always feel about myself, as this journal (I fancy) makes clear, that I could not but yield a trifle to his apperceptiveness in finding words for my deepest conviction, extremely irregular and dangerous though I well knew my position to be. *And* he spoke in beautiful English; his accent

(not, I think, an Italian one) only making his words the more choice-sounding and delightful!

I should remark here that it was not true that *all* the contessa's guests were "autumnal", even though most of them certainly were. Sweet creature that she is, she had invited several *cavalieri* from the local nobility *expressly* for my sake, and several of them had duly been presented to me, but with small conversation resulting, partly because there was so little available of a common tongue, but more because each single *cavaliero* seemed to me very much what in Derbyshire we call a peg-Jack. It was typical of the contessa's sympathetic nature that she perceived the unsuccess of these *rencontres*, and made no attempt to fan flames that were never so much as faint sparks. How unlike the matrons of Derbyshire, who, when they have set their minds to the task, will work the bellows in such cases not merely for a whole single evening, but for weeks, months, or, on occasion, years! But then it would be unthinkable to apply the word "matron" to the lovely contessa! As it was, the four *cavalieri* were left to make what they could of the young contessina and such other *bambine* as were on parade.

I pause for a moment seeking words in which to describe him. He is above the average tall, and, while slender and elegant, conveys a wondrous impression of force and strength. His skin is somewhat pallid, his nose aquiline and commanding (though with quivering, sensitive nostrils), his mouth scarlet and (I must apply the word) passionate. Just to look at his mouth made me think of great poetry and wide seas. His fingers are very long and fine, but powerful in their grip: as I learned for myself before the end of the evening. His hair I at first thought quite black, but I saw later that it was delicately laced with grey, perhaps even white. His brow is high, broad, and noble. Am I describing a god or a man? I find it hard to be sure.

As for his conversation I can only say that, indeed, it was not of this world. He proffered none of the empty chatter expected at social gatherings; which, in so far as it has any meaning at all, has a meaning quite different from that which the words of themselves convey—a meaning often odious to me. Everything he said (at least after that first conventional compliment) spoke to something deep within me, and everything I said in reply was what I really wanted to say. I have been able to talk in that way before with no

man of any kind, from Papa downwards; and with very few women. And yet I find it difficult to recall what subjects we discussed. I think that may be a *consequence* of the feeling with which we spoke. The feeling I not merely recollect but feel still—all over and through me—deep and warm-transfiguring. The subjects, no. They were life, and beauty, and art, and nature, and myself: in fact, *everything*. Everything, that is, except the very different and very silly things that almost everyone else talks about all the time, chatter and chump without stopping this side of the churchyard. He did once observe that "Words are what prevail with women", and I could only smile, it was so true. *Fortunately*, Mamma *never* re-appeared. As for the rest of them, I daresay they were more relieved than otherwise to find the gauche little English girl off their hands, so to speak, and apparently provided for. With Mamma indisposed, the obligation to watch over me would descend upon the contessa, but her I saw only in the distance. Perhaps she was resolved not to intrude where *I* should not wish it. If so, it would be what I should expect of her. I do not know.

Then came supper. Much to my surprise (and chagrin), my friend, if so I may call him, excused himself from participating. His explanation, lack of appetite, could hardly be accepted as sufficient or courteous, but the words he employed, succeeded (as always, I feel, with him) in purging the offence. He affirmed most earnestly that I must sustain myself even though he were unable to escort me, and that he would await my return. As he spoke, he gazed at me so movingly that I could but accept the situation, though I daresay I had as little appetite (for the coarse foods of this world) as he. I perceive that I have so far omitted to refer to the beauty and power of his eyes; which are so dark as to be almost black—at least by the light of candles. Glancing back at him, perhaps a little keenly, it occurred to me that he might be bashful about showing himself in his full years by the bright lights of the supper tables. It is a vanity *by no means* confined to my own sex. Indeed he seemed almost to be shrinking away from the augmented brightness even at this far end of the room. And this for all the impression of strength which was the most marked thing about him. Tactfully I made to move off. "You will return?" he asked, so anxiously and compellingly. I remained calm. I merely smiled.

And then Papa caught hold of me. He said that Mamma, having gone upstairs, had succumbed totally, as I might have known in advance she would do, and in fact *did* know; and that, when I had supped, I had "better come upstairs also". At that Papa elbowed me through to the tables and started trying to stuff me like a turkey, but, as I have said, I had little gusto for it, so little that I cannot now name a single thing that I ate, or that Papa ate either. Whatever it was, I "washed it down" (as we say in Derbyshire) with an unusual quantity (for me) of the local wine, which people, including Papa, always say is so "light", but which always seems to me no "lighter" than any other, but noticeably "heavier" than some I could name. What is more, I had already consumed a certain amount of it earlier in the evening when I was supposed to be flirting with the local peg-Jacks. One curious thing is that Papa, who never fails to demur at my doing almost anything else, seems to have no objection to my drinking wine quite heavily. I do not think I have ever known him even try to impose a limit. That is material, of course, only in the rare absence of Mamma, to whom this observation does not apply. But Mamma herself is frequently unwell after only two or three glasses. At supper last night, I was in a state of "trance": eating food was well-nigh impossible, but drinking wine almost fatally facile. Then Papa started trying to push me off to bed again—or perhaps to hold Mamma's head. After all that wine, and with my new friend patiently waiting for me, it was farcical. But I had to dispose of Papa somehow, so I promised him faithfully, and forgot my promise (whatever it was) immediately. Mercifully, I have not so far set eyes upon Papa since that moment.

Or, in reality, upon *anyone* until the contessa waked me this morning: on anyone but *one*.

There he was quietly awaiting me among the shadows cast by the slightly swaying tapestries and by the flapping bannerets ranged round the walls above us. This time he actually clutched my hand in his eagerness. It was only for a moment, of course, but I felt the firmness of his grip. He said he hoped he was not keeping me from the dance floor, but I replied No, oh No. In truth, I was barely even capable of dancing at that moment; and I fancy that the measures trod by the musty relics around us were, at the best of times, not for me. Then he said, with a slight smile, that once he had been a great dancer. Oh, I said idly and under the power of the wine; where was

that? At Versailles, he replied; and in Petersburg. I must say that, wine or no wine, this surprised me; because surely, as everyone knows, Versailles was burned down by the incendiaries in 1789, a good thirty years ago? I must have glanced at him significantly, because he then said, smiling once more, though faintly: "Yes, I am very, *very* old." He said it with such curious emphasis that he did not seem to demand some kind of denial, as such words normally do. In fact, I could find nothing immediate to say at all. And yet it was nonsense, and denial would have been sincere. I do not know his age, and find even an approximation difficult, but "very, very old" he most certainly is not, but in all important ways one of the truly youngest people that can be imagined, and one of the most truly ardent. He was wearing the most beautiful black clothes, with a tiny Order of some kind, I am sure *most* distinguished, because so unobtrusive. Papa has often remarked that the flashy display of Honours is no longer correct.

In some ways the most romantic thing of all is that I do not even know his name. As people were beginning to leave the party, not so very late, I suppose, as most of the people were, after all, quite old, he took my hand and this time held it, nor did I even affect to resist. "We shall meet again," he said, "many times;" looking so deeply and steadily into my eyes that I felt he had penetrated my inmost heart and soul. Indeed, there was something so powerful and mysterious about my own feelings at that moment that I could only murmur "Yes," in a voice so weak that he could hardly have heard me, and then cover my eyes with my hands, those eyes into which he had been gazing so piercingly. For a moment (it cannot have been longer, or my discomposure would have been observed by others), I sank down into a chair with all about me black and swimming, and when I had recovered myself, he was no longer there, and there was nothing to do but be kissed by the contessa, who said "You're looking tired, child," and be hastened to my big bed, immediately.

And though new emotions are said to deprive us of rest (as I have myself been able to confirm on one or two occasions), I seem to have *slept* immediately too, and very deeply, and for a very long time. I know, too, that I dreamed remarkably, but I cannot at all recollect of what. Perhaps I do not need the aid of memory, for surely I can surmise?

On the first occasion since I have been in Italy, the sun is truly very hot. I do not think I shall write any more today. I have already covered pages in my small, clear handwriting, which owes so much to Miss Gisborne's patience and severity, and to her high standards in all matters touching young girlhood. I am rather surprised that I have been left alone for so long. Though Papa and Mamma do not seem to me to accomplish very much in proportion to the effort they expend, yet they are very inimical to "lying about and doing nothing", especially in my case, but in their own cases also, as I must acknowledge. I wonder how Mamma is faring after the excitement of last night? I am sure I should arise, dress, and ascertain; but instead I whisper to myself that once more I feel powerfully drawn towards the embrace of Morpheus.

9 October. Yesterday morning I decided that I had already recorded enough for one single day (though for what wonderful events I had to try, however vainly, to find words!), but there are few private occupations in this world about which I care more than inscribing the thoughts and impressions of my heart in this small, secret journal, which no one else shall ever in this world see (I shall take good care of that), so that I am sure I should again have taken up my pen in the evening, had there been any occurrence sufficiently definite to write about. *That*, I fear, is what Miss Gisborne would call one of my overloaded sentences, but overloaded sentences can be the reflection, I am sure, of overloaded spirits, and even be their only relief and outlet! How well at this moment do I recall Miss Gisborne's moving counsel: Only find the right words for your troubles, and your troubles become half-joys. Alas, for me at this hour there can be no right words: in some strange way that I can by no means grasp hold of, I find myself fire and ice in equal parts. I have never before felt so greatly alive and yet I catch in myself an eerie conviction that my days are now closely numbered. It does not frighten me, as one would expect it to do. Indeed, it is very nearly a relief. I have never moved at my ease in this world, despite all the care that has been lavished on me; and if I had never known Caroline, I can only speculate what would have become of me. And now! What is Caroline, hitherto my dearest friend (and sometimes her Mamma too), by comparison with . . . Oh, there *are* no words. Also I have not completely recovered from the demands which last night made upon me. This is something I am rather ashamed of and shall

admit to no one. But it is true. As well as being torn by emotion, I am worn to a silken thread.

The contessa, having appeared in my room yesterday morning, then disappeared and was not seen again all day, as on the day we arrived. All the same she seemed to have spoken to Mamma about me, as she had said she would be doing. This soon became clear.

It was already afternoon before I finally rose from my bed and ventured from my sunny room. I was feeling very hungry once more, and I felt that I really must find out whether Mamma was fully recovered. So I went first and knocked at the door of Mamma and Papa's rooms. As there was no answer, I went downstairs, and, though there was no one else around (when it is at all sunny, most Italians simply lie down in the shade), there was Mamma, in full and blooming health, on the terrace overlooking the garden. She had her workbox with her and was sitting in the full sun trying to do two jobs at once, perhaps three, in her usual manner. When Mamma is feeling quite well, she always fidgets terribly. I fear that she lacks what the gentleman we met in Lausanne called "the gift of repose". (I have never forgotten that expression.)

Mamma set about me at once. "Why didn't you dance with even one of those nice young men whom the contessa had gone to the trouble of inviting simply for your sake? The contessa is very upset about it. Besides, what have you been doing all the morning? This lovely, sunny day? And what is all this other rubbish the contessa has been trying to tell me about you? I cannot understand a word of it. Perhaps you can enlighten me? I suppose it is something I ought to know about. No doubt it is a consequence of your father and mother agreeing to your going into the town on your own?"

Needless to say, I know by this time how to reply to Mamma when she rants on in terms such as these.

"The contessa is very upset about it all," Mamma exclaimed again after I had spoken; as if a band of knaves had stolen all the spoons, and I had been privy to the crime. "She is plainly hinting at something which courtesy prevents her putting into words, and it is something to do with you. I should

be obliged if you would tell me what it is. Tell me at once," Mamma commanded very fiercely.

Of course I was aware that something had taken place between the contessa and me that morning, and by now I knew very well what lay behind it: in one way or another the contessa had divined my *rencontre* of the evening before and had realized something (though how far from the whole!) of the effect it had made upon me. Even to me she had expressed herself in what English people would regard as an overwrought, Italianate way. It was clear that she had said something to Mamma on the subject, but of a veiled character, as she did not wish actually to betray me. She had, indeed, informed me that she was going to do this, and I now wished that I had attempted to dissuade her. The fact is that I had been so somnolent as to be half without my wits.

"Mamma," I said, with the dignity I have learned to display at these times, "if the contessa has anything to complain of in my conduct, I am sure she will complain only when I am present." And, indeed, I *was* sure of that; though doubtful whether the contessa would ever consider complaining about me at all. Her addressing herself to Mamma in the present matter was, I could be certain, an attempt to aid me in some way, even though possibly misdirected, as was almost inevitable with someone who did not know Mamma very well.

"You are defying me, child," Mamma almost screamed. "You are defying your own mother." She had so worked herself up (surely about nothing? Even less than usual?) that she managed to prick herself. Mamma is constantly pricking herself when she attempts needlework, mainly, I always think, because she *will* not concentrate upon any one particular task; and she keeps a wad of lint in her box against the next time it occurs. This time, however, the lint seemed to be missing, and she appeared to have inflicted quite a gash. Poor Mamma flapped about like a bird beneath a net, while the blood was beginning to flow quite freely. I bent forward and sucked it away with my tongue. It was really strange to have Mamma's blood in my mouth. The strangest part was that it tasted delightful; almost like an exceptionally delicious sweetmeat! I feel my own blood mantling to my cheek as I write the words now.

Mamma then managed to staunch the miniature wound with her pocket handkerchief: one of the pretty ones she had purchased in Besançon. She was looking at me in her usual critical way, but all she said was: "It is perhaps fortunate that we are leaving here on Monday."

Though it was our usual routine, nothing had been said on the present occasion, and I was aghast. (Here, I suppose, *was* something definite to record yesterday evening!)

"What!" I cried. "Leave the sweet contessa so soon! Leave, within only a week, the town where Dante walked and wrote!" I smile a little as I perceive how, without thinking, I am beginning to follow the flamboyant, Italian way of putting things. I am not really sure that Dante did *write* anything much in Ravenna, but to Italians such objections have little influence upon the choice of words. I realize that it is a habit I must guard against taking to an extreme.

"Where Dante walked may be not at all a suitable place for you to walk," rejoined Mamma, uncharitably, but with more sharpness of phrase and thought than is customary with her. She was fondling her injured thumb the while, and had nothing to mollify her acerbity towards me. The blood was beginning to redden the impromptu bandage, and I turned away with what writers call "very mixed feelings".

All the same, I did manage to see some more of the wide world before we left Ravenna; and on the very next day, this day, Sunday, and even though it is a Sunday. Apparently, there is no English church in Ravenna, so that all we could compass was for Papa to read a few prayers this morning and go through the Litany, with Mamma and me making the responses. The major-domo showed the three of us to a special room for the purpose. It had nothing in it but an old table with shaky legs and a line of wooden chairs: all dustier and more decrepit even than other things I have seen in the villa. Of course all this has happened in previous places when it was a Sunday, but never before under such dispiriting conditions—even, as I felt, *unhealthy* conditions. I was *most* disagreeably affected by the entire experience and *entirely* unable to imbibe the Word of God, as I should have done. I have never felt like that before even at the least uplifting of Family Prayers. Positively *irreverent* thoughts raced uncontrolledly through my

little head: for example, I found myself wondering how efficacious God's Word could be for Salvation when droned and stumbled over by a mere uncanonized layman such as Papa—no, I mean, of course, *unordained*, but I have let the first word stand because it is so comic when applied to Papa, who is always denouncing "the Roman Saints" and all they represent, such as frequent days of public devotion in their honour. English people speak so unkindly of the Roman Catholic priests, but at least they have all, including the most unworthy of them, been touched by hands that go back and back and back to Saint Peter and so to the Spurting Fountain of Grace itself. You can hardly say the same for Papa, and I believe that even Mr Biggs-Hartley's consecrationary position is a matter of dispute. I feel very strongly that the Blood of the Lamb cannot be mediated unless by the Elect or washed in by hands that are not strong and white.

Oh, how can he fulfil his promise that "We shall meet again", if Papa and Mamma drag me, protesting, from the place where we met first? Let alone meet "Many times"? These thoughts distract me, as I need not say; and yet I am quite sure that they distract me less than one might expect. For that the reason is simple enough: deep within me I *know* that some wondrous thing, some special election, has passed between him and me, and that meet again we shall in consequence, and no doubt "Many times". Distracted about it all though I am, I am simultaneously so sure as to be almost at peace: fire and ice, as I have said. I find I can still sometimes think about other things, which was by no means the case when I fancied, long, long ago, that I was "in love" (perish the thought!) with Mr Franklin Stobart. Yes, yes, my wondrous friend has brought to my wild soul a measure of peace at last! I only wish I did not feel so tired. Doubtless it will pass when the events of the night before last are more distant (what sadness, though, when they are! What sadness, happen what may!), and, I suppose, this afternoon's tiring walk also. No, *not* "tiring". I refuse to admit the word, and that malapert Emilia returned home "fresh as a daisy", to use the expression her kind of person uses where I come from.

But what a walk it proved to be, none the less! We wandered through the *Pineta di Classe*: a perfectly enormous forest between Ravenna and the sea, with pine trees like very thick, dark, bushy umbrellas, and, so they say, either a brigand or a bear hiding behind each one of them! I have never seen

such pine trees before; not in France or Switzerland or the Low Countries, let alone in England. They are more like trees in the *Thousand Nights and a Night* (not that I have read that work), dense enough at the top and stout-trunked enough for rocks to nest in! And such countless numbers of them, all so old! Left without a guide, I should easily have found myself lost within only a few minutes, so many and so vague are the different tracks among the huge conifers but I have to admit that Emilia, quite shed now of her *bien élevée* finicking, strode out almost like a boy, and showed a knowledge of the best routes that I could only wonder at and take advantage of. There is now almost an understanding between me and Emilia, and it is mainly from her that I am learning an amount of Italian that is beginning quite to surprise me. All the time I recall, however, that it is a very simple language: the great poet of *Paradise Lost* (not that I have read that work either) remarked that it was unnecessary to set aside special periods for instruction in Italian, because one could simply pick it up as one went along. So it is proving between me and Emilia.

The forest routes are truly best suited to gentlemen on horseback, and at one place two such emerged from one of the many tracks going off to our left. "*Guardi!*" cried out Emilia and clutched my arm as if she were my intimate. "Milord Byron and Signor Shelley!" (I do not attempt to indicate Emilia's funny approximation to the English names.) What a moment in my life—or in anyone's life! To see at the same time two persons both so great and famous and both so irrevocably doomed! There was not, of course, time enough for any degree of close observation, though Mr Shelley seemed slightly to acknowledge with his crop our standing back a little to allow him and his friend free passage, but I fear that my main impression was of both *giaours* looking considerably older than I had expected and Lord Byron considerably more corpulent (as well as being quite greyheaded, though I believe only at the start of his life's fourth decade). Mr Shelley was remarkably untidy in his dress and Lord Byron most comical: in that respect at least, the reality was in accord with the report. Both were without hats or caps. They cantered away down the track up which we had walked. They were talking in loud voices (Mr Shelley's noticeably high in pitch), both together, above the thudding of their horses' hoofs. Neither of them really stopped talking even when slowing in order to wheel, so to speak, round the spot where we stood.

And so I have at length set eyes upon the fabled Lord Byron! A wondrous moment indeed; but how much more wondrous for me if it had occurred before that recent most wondrous of all possible moments! But it would be very wrong of me to complain because the red and risen moon has quite dimmed my universal nightlight! Lord Byron, that child of destiny, is for the whole world and, no doubt, for all time, or at least for a great deal of it! My fate is a different one and I draw it to my breast with a young girl's eager arms!

"*Come gentili!*" exclaimed Emilia, gazing after our two horsemen. It was not perhaps the most appropriate comment upon Lord Byron, or even upon Mr Shelley, but there was nothing for me to reply (even if I could have found the Italian words), so on went our walk, with Emilia now venturing so far as to sing, in a quite pretty voice, and me lacking heart to chide her, until in the end the pine-trees parted and I got my first glimpse of the Adriatic Sea, and, within a few more paces, a whole wide prospect of it. (The Venetian Lagoon I refuse to take seriously.) The Adriatic Sea is linked with the Mediterranean Sea, indeed quite properly a part or portion of it, so that I can now say to myself that I have "seen the Mediterranean"; which good old Doctor Johnson defined as the true object of all travel. It was almost as if at long last my own eyes had seen the Holy Grail, with the Redemptive Blood streaming forth in golden splendour; and I stood for whole moments quite lost in my own deep thoughts. The world falls from me once more in a moment as I muse upon that luminous, rapturous flood.

But I can write no more. So unwontedly weary do I feel that the vividness of my vision notwithstanding is something to be marvelled at. It is as if my hand were guided as was Isabella's by the distant Traffio in Mrs Fremlinson's wonderful book; so that Isabella was enabled to leave a record of the strange events that preceded her death—without which record, as it now occurs to me, the book, fiction though it be, could hardly with sense have been written at all. The old moon is drenching my sheets and my night-gown in brightest crimson. In Italy, the moon is always full and always so red.

Oh, when next shall I see my friend, my paragon, my genius!

10 October. I have experienced so sweet and great a dream that I must write down the fact before it is forgotten, and even though I find that already there is almost nothing left that *can* be written. I have dreamed that he was with me; that he indued my neck and breast with kisses that were at once the softest and the sharpest in the world; that he filled my ears with thoughts so strange that they could have come only from a world afar.

And now the Italian dawn is breaking: all the sky is red and purple. The rains have gone, as if for ever. The crimson sun calls to me to take flight before it is once more autumn and then winter. Take flight! Today we are leaving for Rimini! Yes, it is but to Rimini that I am to repair. It is farcical.

And in my dawn-red room there is once again blood upon my person. But this time I know. It is at his embrace that my being springs forth, in joy and welcome; his embrace that is at once the softest and the sharpest in the world. How strange that I could ever have failed to recall such bliss!

I rose from my bed to look for water, there being, once more, none in my room. I found that I was so weak with happiness that I all but fainted. But after sinking for a moment upon my bed, I somewhat recovered myself and succeeded in gently opening the door. And what should I find there? Or, rather, whom? In the faintly lighted corridor, at some distance, stood silently none other than the little contessina, whom I cannot recollect having previously beheld since her Mamma's *soirée à danse*. She was dressed in some kind of loose dark wrapper, and I may only leave between her and her conscience what she can have been doing. No doubt for some good reason allied therewith, she seemed turned to stone by the sight of *me*. Of course I was in *déshabillé* even more complete than her own. I had omitted even to cover my night-gown. And upon that there was blood—as if I had suffered an injury. When I walked towards her reassuringly (after all, we are but two young girls and I am not her judge—nor anyone's), she gave a low croaking scream and fled from me as if I had been the Erl Queen herself, but still almost silently, no doubt for her same good reasons. It was foolish of the little contessina, because all I had in mind to do was to take her in my arms, and then to kiss her in token of our common humanity and the strangeness of our encounter at such an hour.

I was disconcerted by the contessina's childishness (these Italians manage to be shrinking *bambine* and hardened women of the world at one and the same time), and, again feeling faint, leaned against the passage wall. When I stood full on my feet once more, I saw by the crimson light coming through one of the dusty windows that I had reached out to stop myself falling and left a scarlet impression of my hand on the painted plaster. It is difficult to excuse and impossible to remove. How I weary of these *règles* and conventionalities by which I have hitherto been bound! How I long for the measureless liberty that has been promised me and of which I feel so complete a future assurance!

But I managed to find some water (the contessa's villa is no longer of the kind that has servitors alert—or supposedly alert—all night in the larger halls), and with this water I did what I could, at least in my own room. Unfortunately I had neither enough water nor enough strength to do all. Besides, I begin to grow reckless.

11 October. No dear dream last night!

Considerable crafty unpleasantness, however, attended our departure yesterday from Ravenna. Mamma disclosed that the contessa was actually lending us her own carriage. "It's because she wants to see the last of us," said Mamma to me, looking at the cornice. "How can that be, Mamma?" I asked. "Surely, she's hardly seen us at all? She was invisible when we arrived, and now she's been almost invisible again for days."

"There's no connection between those two things," Mamma replied. "At the time we arrived, the contessa was feeling unwell, as we mothers often do, you'll learn that for yourself soon. But for the last few days, she's been very upset by your behaviour, and now she wants us to go." As Mamma was still looking at the wall instead of at me, I put out the tip of my tongue, only the merest scrap of it, but *that* Mamma did manage to see, and had lifted her hand several inches before she recollected that I was now as good as an adult and so not to be corrected by a simple cuff.

And then when we were all about to enter the draggled old carriage, lo and behold the contessa did manage to haul herself into the light, and I caught her actually crossing herself behind my back, or what she no doubt thought

was behind my back. I had to clench my hands to stop myself spitting at her. I have since begun to speculate whether she did not really *intend* me to see what she did. I was once so fond of the contessa, so drawn to her—I can still *remember* that quite well—but *all* is now changed. A week, I find, can sometimes surpass a lifetime; and so, for that matter, can one single indelible night. The contessa took great care to prevent her eyes once meeting mine, though, as soon as I perceived this, I never for a moment ceased glaring at her like a little basilisk. She apologised to Papa and Mamma for the absence of the contessina whom she described as being in bed with screaming megrims or the black cramp or some other malady (I truly cared not what! nor care now!) no doubt incident to girlish immaturity in Italy! And Papa and Mamma made response as if they really minded about the silly little child! Another way of expressing their disapproval of *me*, needless to observe. My considered opinion is that the contessina and her Mamma are simply two of a kind, but that the contessa has had time to become more skilled in concealment and duplicity. I am sure that all Italian females are alike, when one really knows them. The contessa had made me dig my finger-nails so far into my palms that my hands hurt all the rest of the day and still look as if I had caught a dagger in each of them, as in Sir Walter Scott's tale.

We had a coachman and a footman on the box, neither of them at all young, but more like two old wiseacres; and, when we reached Classe, we stopped in order that Papa, Mamma, and I could go inside the church, which is famous for its mosaics, going back, as usual to the Byzantines. The big doors at the western end were open in the quite hot sunshine and indeed the scene inside did look very pretty, all pale azure, the colour of Heaven, and shining gold; but I saw no more of it than that, because as I was about to cross the threshold, I was again overcome by my faintness, and sitting down on a bench, bade Papa and Mamma go in without me, which they immediately did, in the sensible English way, instead of trying to make an ado over me, in the silly Italian way. The bench was of marble, with arms in the shape of lions, and though the marble was worn, and cut, and pock-marked, it was a splendid, heavy object, carved, if I mistake not, by the Romans themselves. Seated on it, I soon felt better once more, but then I noticed the two fat old men on the coach doing something or other to the doors and windows. I supposed they were greasing them, which I am sure

would have been very much in order, as would have been a considerable application of paint to the entire vehicle. But when Papa and Mamma at last came out of the church, and we all resumed our places, Mamma soon began to complain of a smell, which she said was, or at least resembled, that of the herb, garlic. Of course when one is abroad, the smell of garlic is *everywhere*, so that I quite understood when Papa merely told Mamma not to be fanciful; but then I found that I myself was more and more affected, so that we completed the journey in almost total silence, none of us, except Papa, having much appetite for the very crude meal set before us en route at Cesenatico. "You're looking white," said Papa to me, as we stepped from the coach. Then he added to Mamma, but hardly attempting to prevent my hearing, "I can see why the contessa spoke to you as she did". Mamma merely shrugged her shoulders: something she would never have thought of doing before we came abroad, but which now she does frequently. I nearly said something spiteful. At the end, the contessa, when she condescended to appear at all, was constantly disparaging my appearance, and indeed I am pale, paler than I once was, though always I have been pale enough, pale as a little phantom; but only I know the reason for the change in me, and no one else shall know it ever, because no one else ever can. It is not so much a "secret". Rather is it a revelation.

In Rimini we are but stopping at the inn; and we are almost the only persons to be doing so. I cannot wonder at this: the inn is a gaunt, forbidding place; the *padrona* has what in Derbyshire we call a "harelip"; and the attendance is of the worst. Indeed, no one has so far ventured to come near me. All the rooms, including mine, are very large; and all lead into one another, in the style of 200 years ago. The building resembles a palazzo that has fallen upon hard times, and perhaps that is what it is. At first I feared that my dear Papa and Mamma were to be ensconced in the apartment adjoining my own, which would have suited me not at all, but, for some reason, it has not happened, so that between my room and the staircase are two dark and empty chambers, which would once have caused me alarm, but which now I welcome. Everything is poor and dusty. Shall I ever repose abroad in such ease and *bien-être* as one takes for granted in Derbyshire? Why No, I shall not: and a chill runs down my back as I inscribe the words; but a chill more of excitement than of fear. Very soon now shall I be entirely elsewhere and entirely above such trivia.

I have opened a pair of the big windows, a grimy and, I fear, a noisy task. I flitted out in the moonlight on to the stone balcony, and gazed down into the *piazza*. Rimini seems now to be a very poor town, and there is nothing of the nocturnal uproar and riot which are such usual features of Italian existence. At this hour, all is completely silent—even strangely so. It is still very warm, but there is a mist between the earth and the moon.

I have crept into another of these enormous Italian beds. He is winging towards me. There is no further need for words. I have but to slumber, and that will be simple, so exhausted I am.

12 13 14 October. Nothing to relate but him, and of him nothing that can be related.

I am very tired, but it is tiredness that follows exaltation, not the vulgar tiredness of common life. I noticed today that I no longer have either shadow or reflection. Fortunately Mamma was quite destroyed (as the Irish simpletons express it) by the journey from Ravenna, and has not been seen since. How many, many hours one's elders pass in retirement! How glad I am never to have to experience such bondage! How I rejoice when I think about the new life which spreads before me into infinity, the new ocean which already laps at my feet, the new vessel with the purple sail and the red oars upon which I shall at any moment embark! When one is confronting so tremendous a transformation, how foolish seem words, but the habit of them lingers even when I have hardly strength to hold the pen! Soon, soon, new force will be mine, fire that is inconceivable; and the power to assume any night-shape that I may wish, or to fly through the darkness with none. What love is his! How chosen among all women am I; and I am just a little English girl! It is a miracle, and I shall enter the halls of Those Other Women with pride.

Papa is so beset by Mamma that he has failed to notice that I am eating nothing and drinking only water; that at our horrid, odious meals I am but feigning.

Believe it or not, yesterday we visited, Papa and I, the Tempio Malatestiano. Papa went as an English Visitor: I (at least by comparison with Papa) as a Pythoness. It is a beautiful edifice, among the most beautiful in the world,

they say. But for me a special splendour lay in the noble and amorous dead it houses, and in the control over them which I feel increase within me. I was so rent and torn with new power that Papa had to help me back to the inn. Poor Papa, burdened, as he supposes, by *two* weak invalid women! I could almost pity him.

I wish I had reached the pretty little contessina and kissed her throat.

15 October. Last night I opened my pair of windows (the other pair resists me, weak—in terms of this world—as I am), and, without quite venturing forth, stood there in nakedness and raised both my arms. Soon a soft wind began to rustle, where all had previously been still as death. The rustling steadily rose to roaring, and the faint chill of the night turned to heat as when an oven door is opened. A great crying out and weeping, a buzzing and screaming and scratching, swept in turmoil past the open window, as if invisible (or almost invisible) bodies were turning around and around in the air outside, always lamenting and accusing. My head was split apart by the sad sounds and my body as moist as if I were an Ottoman. Then, on an instant, all had passed by. *He* stood there before me in the dim embrasure of the window. "That," he said, "is Love as the elect of this world know it."

"The *elect*?" I besought him, in a voice so low that it was hardly a voice at all (but what matter?). "Why yes," he seemed to reaffirm. "Of this world, the elect."

16 October. The weather in Italy changes constantly. Today once more it is cold and wet.

They have begun to suppose me ill. Mamma, back on her legs for a spell, is fussing like a blowfly round a dying lamb. They even called in a *medico*, after discussing at length in my presence whether an Italian physician could be regarded as of any utility. With what voice I have left, I joined in vigorously that he could not. All the same, a creature made his appearance: wearing fusty black, and, believe it or not, a grey wig—in all, a veritable Pantalone. What a farce! With my ever sharper fangs, I had him soon despatched, and yelling like the Old Comedy he belonged to. Then I spat forth his enfeebled, senile lymph, cleaning my lips of his skin and smell, and returned, hugging myself, to my couch.

Janua mortis vita, as Mr Biggs-Hartley says in his funny dog latin. And to think that today is Sunday! I wonder why no one has troubled to pray over me?

17 October. I have been left alone all day. Not that it matters.

Last night came the strangest and most beautiful event of my life, a seal laid upon my future.

I was lying here with my double window open, when I noticed that mist was coming in. I opened my arms to it, but my blood began to trickle down my bosom from the wound in my neck, which of course no longer heals—though I seem to have no particular trouble in concealing the mark from the entire human race, not forgetting learned men with certificates from the University of Sciozza.

Outside in the *piazza* was a sound of shuffling and nuzzling, as of sheep being folded on one of the farms at home. I climbed out of bed, walked across, and stepped on to the balcony.

The mist was filtering the moonlight into a silver-grey that I have never seen elsewhere.

The entire *piazza*, a very big one, was filled with huge, grizzled wolves, all perfectly silent, except for the small sounds I have mentioned, all with their tongues flopping and lolling, black in the silvery light, and all gazing up at my window.

Rimini is near to the Apennine Mountains, where wolves notoriously abound, and commonly devour babies and small children. I suppose that the coming cold is drawing them into the towns.

I smiled at the wolves. Then I crossed my hands on my little bosom and curtsied. They will be prominent among my new people. My blood will be theirs, and theirs mine.

I forgot to say that I have contrived to lock my door. Now, I am assisted in such affairs.

Somehow I have found my way back to bed. It has become exceedingly cold, almost icy. For some reason I think of all the empty rooms in this battered old palazzo (as I am sure it once was), so fallen from their former stateliness. I doubt if I shall write any more. I do not think I shall have any more to say.

The Same Dog (1974)

Though there were three boys, there were also twelve long years between Hilary Brigstock and his immediately elder brother, Gilbert. On the other hand, there was only one year and one month between Gilbert and the future head of the family, Roger.

Hilary could not remember when first the suggestion entered his ears that his existence was the consequence of a "mistake". Possibly he had in any case hit upon the idea already, within his own head. Nor did his Christian name help very much: people always supposed it to be the name of a girl, even though his father asserted loudly on all possible occasions that the idea was a complete mistake, a product of etymological and historical ignorance, and of typical modern sloppiness.

And his mother was dead. He was quite unable to remember her, however hard he tried; as he from time to time did. Because his father never remarried, having as clear and definite views about women as he had about many other things, Hilary grew up against an almost entirely male background. In practice, this background seemed to consist fundamentally of Roger and Gilbert forever slugging and bashing at one another, with an occasional sideswipe at their kid brother. So Hilary, though no milksop, tended to keep his own counsel and his own secrets. In particular, there are few questions asked by a young boy when there is no woman to reply to them; or, at least, few questions about anything that matters.

The family lived in the remoter part of Surrey. There was a very respectable, rather expensive, semi-infant school, Briarside, to which most of the young children were directed from the earliest age practicable. Hilary was duly sent there, as had been his brothers ahead of him, in order to learn some simple reading and figuring, and how to catch a ball, before being passed on to the fashionable preparatory school, Gorselands, on his way to Cheltenham or Wellington. Some of the family went to the one place, some to the other. It was an unusual arrangement, and outsiders could never see the sense in it.

Almost unavoidably, Briarside was a mixed establishment (though it would have been absurd to describe it as co-educational), and there Hilary formed a close and remarkable friendship with a girl, two years older than himself, named Mary Rossiter. The little girls at the school were almost the first Hilary had ever met. Even his young cousins were all boys, as happens in some families.

Mary had dark, frizzy hair, which stuck out round her head; and a rather flat face, with, however, an already fine pair of large, dark eyes, which not only sparkled, but seemed to move from side to side in surprising jerks as she spoke, which, if permitted, she did almost continuously. Generally she wore a shirt or sweater and shorts, as little girls were beginning to do at that time, and emanated extroversion; but occasionally, when there was a school celebration, more perhaps for the parents than for the tots, she would appear in a really beautiful silk dress, eclipsing everyone, and all the more in that the dress seemed not precisely right for her, but more like a stage costume. Mary Rossiter showed promise of natural leadership (some of the mums already called her "bossy"), but her fine eyes were for Hilary alone; and not only her eyes, but hands and lips and tender words as well.

From within the first few days of his arrival, Hilary was sitting next to Mary at the classes (if such they could be called) and partnering her inseparably in the playrooms and the garden. The establishment liked the boys to play with the boys, the girls with the girls, and normally no admonition whatever was needed in those directions; but when it came to Hilary and Mary, the truth was that already Mary was difficult to resist when she was set upon a thing. She charmed, she smiled, and she persisted. Moreover, her father was very rich; and it was obvious from everything about her that her parents doted on her.

There were large regions of the week which the school did not claim to fill. Most of the parents awaited the release of their boys and girls and bore them home in small motor cars of the wifely kind. But Mary was left, perhaps dangerously, with her freedom; simply because she wanted it to be like that. At least, she wanted it to be like that after she had met Hilary. It is less certain where she had stood previously. As for Hilary, no one greatly cared—within a wide span of hours—whether he was home or not. There

was a woman named Mrs Parker who came in each day and did all that needed to be done and did it as well as could be expected (Hilary's father would not even have considered such a person "living in"); but she had no authority to exercise discipline over Hilary, and, being thoroughly modern in her ideas, no temperamental inclination either. If Hilary turned up for his tea, it would be provided. If he did not, trouble was saved.

Hilary and Mary went for long, long walks; for much of the distance, hand in hand. In the midst of the rather droopy and distorted southern-Surrey countryside (or one-time countryside), they would find small, worked-out sandpits, or, in case of rain, disused, collapsing huts, and there they would sit close together, or one at the other's feet, talking without end, and gently embracing. He would force his small fingers through her wiry mop and make jokes about electricity coming out at the ends. She would touch the back of his neck, inside his faded red shirt, with her lips, and nuzzle into the soft, fair thicket on top of his head. They learned the southern-Surrey byways and bridlepaths remarkably thoroughly, for six or eight miles to the southeast, and six or eight miles to the southwest; and, in fact, collaborated in drawing a secret map of them. That was one of the happiest things they ever did. They were always at work revising the secret map, by the use of erasers, and adding to it, and colouring it with crayons borrowed from Briarside. They never tired of walking, because no one had ever said they should.

One day they were badly frightened.

They were walking down a sandy track, which they did not exactly know, when they came upon a large property with a wall round it. The wall was high and apparently thick. It had been covered throughout its length with plaster, but much of the plaster had either flaked, or fallen completely away, revealing the yellow bricks within, themselves tending to crumble. The wall was surmounted by a hipped roofing, which projected, in order to throw clear as much as possible of any rain that might descend; and this roofing also was much battered and gapped. One might have thought the wall to be in a late stage of disease. It was blotched and mottled in every direction. None the less, it continued to be very far from surmountable, even by a fully grown person.

Hilary took a run at it, clutching at a plant which protruded from a gap in the exposed pointing, and simultaneously setting his foot upon the plaster at the bottom of a large space where the rest of the plaster had fallen away. The consequence was instant disaster. The plant leapt from its rooting, and at the same time the plaster on which Hilary's small weight rested fell off the wall in an entire large slab, and shattered into smaller pieces among the rank grass and weeds below, where Hilary lay also.

"Hilary!" It was an authentic scream, and of authentic agony.

"It's all right, Mary." Hilary resolutely raised himself, resolutely refused to weep. "I'm all right. Really I am."

She had run to him and was holding him tightly.

"Mary, please. I'll choke."

Her arms fell away from him, but uncertainly.

"We'd better go home," she said.

"No, of course not. I'm perfectly all right, I tell you. It was nothing." But this last he did not really believe.

"It was *terrible*," said Mary, with solemnity. She was wearing a skirt that day, a small-scale imitation of an adult woman's tweed skirt, and he could see her knees actually knocking together.

He put his arm round her shoulder, but, as he did so, became aware that he was shaking himself. "Silly," he said affectionately. "It wasn't anything much. Let's go on."

But she merely stood there, quivering beneath his extended arm.

There was a perceptible pause. Then she said: "I don't like this place."

It was most unlike her to say such a thing. He had never before known her to do so.

But always he took her seriously. "What's the matter?" he asked. "I am all right, you know. I truly am. You can feel me if you like."

And then the dog started barking—if, indeed, one could call it a bark. It was more like a steady growling roar, with a clatter mixed up in it, almost certainly of gnashing teeth: altogether something more than barking, but unmistakably canine, all the same—horribly so. Detectably it came from within the domain behind the high wall.

"Hilary," said Mary, "let's run."

But her unusual attitude had put Hilary on his mettle.

"I don't know," he said. "Not yet."

"What d'you mean?" she asked.

"I see it like this," said Hilary, rubbing a place on his knee. "Either the dog is chained up, or shut in behind that wall, and we're all right Or else he isn't, and it's no good our running."

It was somewhat the way that Mary's own influence had taught him to think, and she responded to it.

"Perhaps we should look for some big stones," she suggested.

"Yes," he said. "Though I shouldn't think it'll be necessary. I think he must be safely shut up in some way. He'd have been out by now otherwise."

"*I'm* going to look," said Mary.

There are plenty of stones in the worn earth of southern Surrey, and many old bricks and other constructional detritus also. Within two or three minutes, Mary had assembled a pile of such things.

In the meantime, Hilary had gone on a little along the track. He stood there, listening to the clamorous dog almost calmly.

Mary joined him, holding up the front part of her skirt, which contained four of the largest stones, more than she could carry in her hands.

"We won't need them," said Hilary, with confidence. "And if we do, they're everywhere."

Mary leaned forward and let the stones fall to the ground, taking care that they missed her toes. Possibly the quite loud thuds made the dog bark more furiously than ever.

"Perhaps he's standing guard over buried treasure?" suggested Mary.

"Or over some fairy kingdom that mortals may not enter," said Hilary.

They talked about such things for much of the time when they were together. Once they had worked together upon an actual map of Fairyland, and with Giantland adjoining.

"He might have lots of heads," said Mary.

"Come on, let's look," said Hilary.

"Quietly," said Mary, making no other demur.

He took her hand.

"There *must* be a gate," she remarked, after they had gone a little further, with the roaring, growling bark as obstreperous as ever.

"Let's hope it's locked then," he replied. At once he added: "Of course it's locked. He'd have been out by now otherwise."

"You said that before," said Mary. "But perhaps the answer is that there is no gate. There can't always be a gate, you know."

But there was a gate; a pair of gates, high, wrought iron, scrolled, rusted, and heavily padlocked. Through them, Hilary and Mary could see a large, palpably empty house, with many of the windows glassless, and the paint on the outside walls surviving only in streaks and smears, pink, green, and

blue, as the always vaguely polluted atmosphere added its corruption to that inflicted by the weather. The house was copiously mock-battlemented and abundantly ogeed: a structure, without doubt, in the Gothic Revival taste, though of a period uncertain over at least a hundred years. Some of the heavy chimney-stacks had broken off and fallen. The front door, straight before them, was a recessed shadow. It was difficult to see whether it was open or shut. The paving stones leading to it were lost in mossy dampness.

"Haunted house," said Mary.

"What's that?" enquired Hilary.

"Don't exactly know," said Mary. "But Daddy says they're everywhere, though people don't realize it."

"But how can you tell?" asked Hilary, looking at her seriously and a little anxiously.

"Just by the look," replied Mary with authority. "You can tell at once when you know. It's a mistake to look for too long, though."

"Ought we to put it on the map?"

"I suppose so. I'm not sure."

"Is that dog going to bark all day, d'you think?"

"He'll stop when we go away. Let's go, Hilary."

"Look!" cried Hilary, clutching at her. "Here he is. He must have managed to break away. We must show no sign of fear. That's the important thing."

Curiously enough, Mary seemed in no need of this vital guidance. She was already standing rigidly, with her big eyes apparently fixed on the animal, almost as if hypnotized.

Of course, the tall, padlocked bars stood between them and the dog; and another curious thing was that the dog seemed to realize the fact, and to make allowance for it, in a most undoglike manner. Instead of leaping up at

the bars in an endeavour to reach the two of them, and so to caress or bite them, it stood well back and simply stared at them, as if calculating hard. It barked no longer, but instead emitted an almost continuous sound halfway between a growl and a whine, and quite low.

It was a big, shapeless, yellow animal, with long, untidy legs, which shimmered oddly, perhaps as it sought a firm grip on the buried and slippery stones. The dog's yellow skin seemed almost hairless. Blotchy and draggled, it resembled the wall outside. Even the dog's eyes were a flat, dull yellow. Hilary felt strange and uneasy when he observed them; and next he felt upset as he realized that Mary and the dog were gazing at one another as if under a spell.

"Mary!" he cried out. "Mary, don't look like that. Please don't look like that."

He no longer dared to touch her, so alien had she become.

"Mary, let's go. You said we were to go." Now he had begun to cry, while all the time the dog kept up its muffled internal commotion, almost like soft singing.

In the end, but not before Hilary had become very wrought up, the tension fell away from Mary, and she was speaking normally.

"Silly," she said, caressing Hilary. "It's quite safe. You said so yourself."

He had no answer to that. The careful calculations by which earlier he had driven off the thought of danger had now proved terrifyingly irrelevant. All he could do was subside to the ground and lose himself in tears, his head between his knees.

Mary knelt beside him. "What are you crying about, Hilary? There's no danger. He's a friendly dog, really."

"He's not, he's not."

She tried to draw his hands away from his face. "Why are you crying, Hilary?" One might have felt that she quite urgently needed to know.

"I'm frightened."

"What are you frightened of? It can't be the dog. He's gone."

At that, Hilary slowly uncurled, and forgetting, on the instant, to continue weeping, directed his gaze at the rusty iron gates. There was no dog visible.

"Where's he gone, Mary? Did you see him go?"

"No, I didn't actually *see* him," she replied. "But he's gone. And that's what you care about, isn't it?"

"But *why* did he go? We're still here."

"I expect he had business elsewhere." He knew that she had acquired that explanation too from her father, because she had once told him so.

"Has he found a way out?"

"Of course he hasn't."

"How can you tell?"

"He's simply realized that we don't mean any harm."

"I don't believe you. You're just saying that. Why are you saying that, Mary? You were more scared than I was when we came here. What's happened to you, Mary?"

"What's happened to me is that I've got back a little sense." From whom, he wondered, had she learned to say *that*? It was so obviously insincere, that it first hurt, and then once more frightened him.

"I want to go home," he said.

She nodded, and they set off, but not hand in hand.

There was one more incident before they had left the area behind them.

As they returned up the gently sloping, sandy track, Hilary kept his eyes on the ground, carefully not looking at the yellow wall on his left, or looking at it as little as possible, and certainly not looking backwards over his shoulder. At the place where the wall bore away leftwards at a right angle, the track began to ascend rather more steeply for perhaps a hundred yards, to a scrubby tableland above. They were walking in silence, and Hilary's ears, always sharper than the average, were continuously strained for any unusual sound, probably from behind the wall, but possibly, and even more alarmingly, not. When some way up the steeper slope, he seemed to hear something, and could not stop himself from looking back.

There was indeed something to see, though Hilary saw it for only an instant.

At the corner of the wall, there was no special feature, as one might have half-expected, such as a turret or an obelisk. There was merely the turn in the hipped roofing. But now Hilary saw, at least for half a second, that a man was looking over, installed at the very extremity of the internal angle. There was about half of him visible, and he seemed tall and slender and bald. Hilary failed to notice how he was dressed: if, indeed, he was dressed at all.

Hilary jerked back his head. He did not feel able to mention what he had seen to Mary, least of all now.

He did not feel able, in fact, to mention the sight to anyone. Twenty years later, he was once about to mention it, but even then decided against doing so. In the meantime, and for years after these events, the thought and memory of them lay at the back of his mind; partly because of what had already happened, partly because of what happened soon afterwards.

The outing must have upset Hilary more than he knew, because the same evening he felt ill, and was found by Mrs Parker to have a temperature. That was the beginning of it, and the end of it was not for a period of weeks; during which there had been two doctors, and, on some of the days and nights, an impersonal nurse, or perhaps two of them also. There had also been much bluff jollying along from Hilary's father; Hilary's brothers

being both at Wellington. Even Mrs Parker had to be reinforced by a blowsy teenager named Eileen.

In the end, and quite suddenly, Hilary felt as good as new: either owing to the miracles of modern medicine, or, more probably, owing to the customary course of nature.

"You may feel right, old son," said Doctor Morgan-Vaughan; "but you're *not* right, not yet."

"When can I go back to school?"

"Do you want to go back, son?"

"Yes," said Hilary.

"Well, well," said Doctor Morgan-Vaughan. "Small boys felt differently in my day."

"When can I?" asked Hilary.

"One fine day," said Doctor Morgan-Vaughan. "There's no hurry about it. You've been ill, son, really ill, and you don't want to do things in a rush."

So a matter of two months had passed before Hilary had any inkling of the fact that something had happened to Mary also. He would have liked to see her, but had not cared, rather than dared, to suggest it. At no time had he even mentioned her at home. There was no possibility of his hearing anything about her until his belated return to school.

Even then, the blowsy teenager was sent with him on the first day, lest, presumably, he faint at the roadside or vanish upwards to Heaven. His heart was heavy and confused, as he walked; and Eileen found difficulty in conversing with a kid of his kind anyway. He was slightly relieved by the fact that when they arrived at the school, she had no other idea than to hasten off with alacrity.

The headmistress (if so one might term her), who was also part-proprietor of the establishment, a neat lady of 36, was waiting specially for Hilary's

arrival after his illness; and greeted him with kindness and a certain understanding. The children also felt a new interest in him, though with most of them it was only faint. But there was a little girl with two tight plaits and a gingham dress patterned with asters and sunflowers, who seemed more sincerely concerned about what had been happening to him. Her name was Valerie Watkinson.

"Where's Mary?" asked Hilary.

"Mary's dead," said Valerie Watkinson solemnly.

Hilary's first response was merely hostile. "I don't believe you," he said.

Valerie Watkinson nodded three or four times, even more solemnly.

Hilary clutched hold of both her arms above the elbows. "I don't believe you," he said again.

Valerie Watkinson began to cry. "You're hurting me."

Hilary took away his hands. Valerie did not move or make any further complaint. They stood facing one another in silence for a perceptible pause, with Valerie quietly weeping.

"Is it true?" said Hilary in the end.

Valerie nodded again behind her tiny handkerchief with a pinky-blue Swiss milkmaid on one corner. "You're very pale," she gasped out, her mouth muffled.

She stretched out a small damp hand. "Poor Hilary. Mary was your friend. I'm sorry for you, Hilary."

"Did she go to bed with a temperature?" asked Hilary. He was less unaccustomed than most children to the idea of death because he was perfectly well aware that of late he himself was said to have escaped death but narrowly.

This time Valerie shook her head, though with equal solemnity. "No," she said. "At least, I don't think so. It's all a mystery. We haven't been *told* she's dead. We thought she was ill, like you. Then Sandy saw something in the paper." Sandy Stainer was a podgy sprawling boy with, as one might suppose, vaguely reddish hair.

"What did he see?"

"Something nasty," said Valerie with confidence. "I don't know what it was. We're not supposed to know."

"Sandy knows."

"Yes," said Valerie.

"Hasn't he told?"

"He's been told not to. Miss Milland had him in her room."

"But don't you want to know yourself?"

"No, I don't," said Valerie, with extreme firmness. "My mummy says it's enough for us to know that poor Mary's dead. She says that's what really matters."

It was certainly what really mattered to Hilary. He passed his first day back at school looking very pallid and speaking no further word except when directly addressed by Miss Milland or Mrs Everson; both of whom agreed, after school hours, that Hilary Brigstock had been sent back before he should have been. It was something to which they were entirely accustomed: the children often seemed to divide into those perpetually truant and those perpetually in seeming need of more care and attention than they were receiving at home. That it should be so was odd in such a professional and directorial area; though Mrs Cartier, who looked in every now and then to teach elementary French, and was a Maoist, said it was just what one always found.

Hilary had never spoken to Sandy Stainer, nor ever wanted to. The present matter was not one which he would care to enquire about in such a quarter. Moreover, he knew perfectly well that he would be told nothing, but merely tormented. Sandy Stainer's lips had somehow been sealed in some remarkably effective way; and he would be likely to find, in such a situation, clear conscience and positive social sanction for quiet arm-twisting and general vexing of enquirers, especially of enquirers known to be as vulnerable as Hilary. And Mary had been so much to Hilary that he had no other close friend in the school—probably no other friend there at all. Perhaps Hilary was one of those men who are designed for one woman only.

Certainly he had no little friends outside the school; nor had ever been offered any. Nor, as usual, was the death of Mary a matter that could be laid before his father. In any case, what could his father permit himself to tell him; when all was so obscure, and so properly so?

Within a day or two, Hilary was back in bed once more, and again missing from school.

Doctor Morgan-Vaughan could not but suspect this time that the trouble contained a marked element of "the psychological"; but it was an aspect of medicine that had always struck him as almost entirely unreal, and certainly as a therapeutic dead end, except for those resolved to mine it financially. He preferred to treat visibly physiological disturbances with acceptably physiological nostra. In the present case, he seriously thought of again calling in Doctor Oughtred, who had undoubtedly made a very real contribution in the earlier manifestation of the child's illness.

"Do you read the local paper, Mrs Parker?" asked Hilary, whiter than the sheets between which he lay.

"I don't get round to it," replied Mrs Parker, in her carefully uncommitted way. "We take it in. Mr Parker feels we should."

"Why does he feel that?"

"Well, you want to know what's going on around you, don't you?"

"Yes," said Hilary.

"Not that Mr Parker reads anything very much. Why should he, when he's got the wireless? The Advertiser just piles up in heaps till the waste people come for it from the hospital."

"What do they do with it at the hospital?"

"Pulp it, I believe. You've got to do what you can for charity, haven't you?"

"Bring me all the local papers in the heap, Mrs Parker. I'm ill too. It's just like the hospital."

"You couldn't read them," said Mrs Parker, as before; carefully not conceding.

"I *could*," said Hilary.

"How's that? You can't read."

"I can," said Hilary. "I can read anything. Well, almost anything. Bring me the papers, Mrs Parker."

She expressed no surprise that he should want to read something so boring even to her; nor did it seem to strike her that there might be anything significant in his demand. In fact, she could think of nothing to say; and as, in any case, she was always wary about what she let fall in the ambience of her employment, she left Hilary's room without one word more.

But, as much as three days later, Eileen had something to say when she brought him his midday meal (not a very imaginative one) and an assembly of pills.

"You *are* old-fashioned," remarked Eileen. "At least that's what Mrs Parker thinks."

"What d'you mean?" asked Hilary in a sulky tone, because he disliked Eileen.

"Asking for the *Advertiser*, when you can't even read it."

"I *can* read it," said Hilary.

"I know more than Mrs Parker knows," said Eileen. "It's that little girl, isn't it? Mary Rossiter, your little sweetheart."

Hilary said nothing.

"I've seen you together. I know. Not that I've told Mrs Parker."

"You *haven't*?"

"Not likely. Why should I tell *her*?"

Hilary considered that.

"She's a silly cow," said Eileen casually.

Hilary was clutching with both hands at the sheet. "Do you know what happened to Mary?" he asked, looking as far away from Eileen as he could look.

"Not exactly. She was interfered with, and mauled about. Bitten all over, they say, poor little thing. But it's been hushed up proper, and you'd better hurry and forget all about her. That's all you *can* do, isn't it?"

In the end, having passed at Briarside and at Gorselands through the more difficult years of the Second World War, Hilary went to Wellington also. His father thought it a tidier arrangement: better adapted to more restricted times. By then, of course, Hilary's brothers, Roger and Gilbert, had left the school, though in neither case for the university. There seemed no point, they both decided; and their father had had no difficulty in agreeing. He had been to a university himself, and it had seemed to him more of a joke than anything else, and a not particularly useful one.

Despite the intermittent connection with Wellington, theirs had not been a particularly army family, and it was with surprise that Mr Brigstock learned of his youngest son's decision to make the army his career, especially as the

war was not so long concluded. Hilary, as we have said, was no milksop, and no doubt the Wellington ethos had its influence; but, in any case, it is a mistake to think that an officers' mess is manned solely by good-class rowdies. There are as many (and, naturally, as few) sensitive people in the army as in most other places; and some of them find their way there precisely because they are so.

A further complexity is that the sensitive are sometimes most at their ease with the less sensitive. Among Hilary's friends at the depot, was a youth named Callcutt, undisguisedly extrovert, very dependable. On one occasion, Hilary Brigstock took Callcutt home for a few days of their common leave.

It was not a thing he did often, even now. The atmosphere of his home still brought out many reserves in him. It would hardly be too much to say that he himself went there as little as possible. But by now both Roger and Gilbert were married, and had homes of their own, as they frequently mentioned; so that Hilary was beginning to expect qualms within him on the subject of his father's isolation, and, surely, loneliness. Late middle-aged people living by themselves were always nowadays said to be lonely. Unlike most sons, Hilary at times positively wished that his father would marry again, as people in his situation were expected to do; that his father's views on the subject of women had somehow become less definite.

And really the place was dull. Stranded there with Callcutt, Hilary perceived luminously, as in a minutely detailed picture, how entirely dull, in every single aspect, his home was.

More secrets are improperly disclosed from boredom than from any other motive; and more intimacies imparted, with relief resulting, or otherwise.

"I love it here," said Callcutt, one day after lunch, when Mr Brigstock had gone upstairs for the afternoon, as he normally did.

"That's fine," replied Hilary. "What do you love in particular about it?"

"The quiet," said Callcutt immediately. "I think one's home should be a place where one can go for some quiet. You're a lucky chap."

"Yes," agreed Hilary. "Quiet it certainly is. Nowadays, at least. When my two elder brothers were here, it wasn't quiet at all."

"Remind me where they are now?"

"Married. Both of them. With homes of their own."

"Nice girls?"

"So-so."

"Kids?"

"Two each."

"Boys?"

"All boys. We only breed boys."

"Only?"

"There hasn't been a girl in the Brigstock family within living memory."

"Saves a lot of trouble," said Callcutt.

"Loses a lot of fun," said Hilary.

"Not at that age."

"*Particularly*, perhaps, at that age."

"How's that? You're not one of these Lolita types, like old whatnot?"

"When I was a child I knew a girl who meant more to me than any girl has meant to me since. More, indeed, than anyone at all. Remember that I never knew my mother."

"Lucky chap again," said Callcutt. "Well, in some ways. No, I shouldn't have said that. I apologize. Forget it."

"That's all right."

"Tell me about your girl friend. I'm quite serious. As a matter of fact, I know perfectly well what you meant about her."

Hilary hesitated. Almost certainly, if it had not been for the absence of other topics, other possible activities, other interests, he would never have mentioned Mary Rossiter at all. He had never spoken of her to a soul for the twenty years since she had vanished, and for at least half that time he had thought of her but infrequently.

"Well, if you like, I *will* tell you. For what it's worth, which isn't much, especially to a third party. But we've nothing else to do."

"Thank the Lord!" commented Callcutt.

"I feel the Brigstocks should do more to provide entertainment"

"Good God!" rejoined Callcutt.

So, for the first time, Hilary imparted much of the story to another. He told how sweet Mary Rossiter had been, how they used to go for surprisingly long walks together, how they found the crumbling wall, and heard, and later saw, the shapeless, slithery dog, which seemed the colour of the wall, and saw also the collapsing mansion or near-mansion, which Mary, just like a kid, had immediately said must be a haunted house. Hilary even told Callcutt about the maps that the two children had drawn together, and that they had been maps not only of Surrey, but of Fairyland, and Giantland, and the Land of Shades also.

"Good preparation for the army," observed Callcutt.

But Hilary did not tell Callcutt about the lean, possibly naked, man he had so positively seen at the extremest angle of the wall. He had been about to tell him, simply without thinking, at the point where the incident came in the narrative; but he passed over the matter.

"Bloody savage dogs!" said Callcutt. "I'm against them. Especially in towns. Straining at the leash, and defecating all over the pavements. Something wrong with the owner's virility, I always think."

"This was the worst dog you ever saw," Hilary responded. "I'm quite confident of that."

"I hate them all," said Callcutt sweepingly. "They carry disease."

"That was the least in the case of the dog I was talking about," observed Hilary. And he told Callcutt of what had happened next—as far as he could tell it.

"Oh, God!" exclaimed Callcutt.

"I suppose it was what people used to call a mad dog."

"But that was well before your time, even if you *were* a kid. There aren't so many mad dogs these days. Anyway, what happened to the dog? Shot, I take it?"

"I have no idea."

"But surely it must have been shot? Things couldn't just have been left at that."

"Well, probably it was shot. I just don't know. I wasn't supposed to know anything at all about what had happened."

"Good God, it *should* have been shot. After doing a thing like that."

"I daresay it *was*."

There was a pause while Callcutt wrestled with his thoughts and Hilary with his memories; memories of which he had remembered little for some longish time past.

"It was the most frightful thing," Callcutt summed up at last. "I say: could we pay a visit to the scene of the crime? Or would that be too much?"

"Not too much if I can find the place." This was indeed how one thing led to another. "I haven't been there since."

"I suppose not," said Callcutt, who hadn't thought of that. Then had added: "What, never?"

"Never," said Hilary. "After all, I'm not here very often."

"Whose car shall we take?"

"As far as I can recall the lie of the land, we had better walk. I daresay it's all caravans and bungalows by now."

And so, substantially, it proved. It would no doubt be wrong to suggest that the municipal authority or statutory body or honorary trustees responsible for the conservation of an open space had in any major degree permitted the public heritage to diminish in area or beauty, but whereas formerly the conserved terrain had merged off into pastures and semi-wild woodland, now it seemed to be encircled almost up to the last inch with houses. They were big, expensive houses, but they had converted the wilderness of Hilary's childhood into something more like a public park, very beaten down, and with the usual close network of amateur footpaths, going nowhere in particular, because serving no function. Round the edge of this slightly sad area Hilary and Callcutt prowled and prospected.

"It was somewhere about here," said Hilary. "Certainly on this side."

"I should have said it had all changed so much that we were unlikely to get far without comparative maps. None of these houses can be more than ten or twelve years old."

They varied greatly in style: from Cotswold to Moroccan, from Ernest George to Frank Lloyd Wright. Some seemed still to value seclusion, but more went in for neighbourliness and open plan. Despite all the desperation of discrepancy, there was a uniformity of tone which was even more depressing.

"I agree that my place has disappeared," said Hilary. "Been built over. Of course it was pretty far gone even then."

The houses were served by a rough road, almost certainly "unadopted". It assured them a precarious degree of freedom from casual motor traffic.

One of the biggest houses was in the Hollywood style: a garish structure with brightly coloured faience roof, much Spanish ironwork, mass-produced but costly, and a flight of outside steps in bright red tiles. The property was surrounded by a scumbled white wall. Hilary and Callcutt stared in through the elaborate, garden-of-remembrance gates.

"It's like a caricature of the old place," said Hilary. "Much smaller, and much louder—but still . . ."

The windows were all shut and there was no one in sight. Even the other houses seemed all to lie silent, and on the rough road nothing and no one passed. The two men continued to peer through the bars of the gate, ornate but trivial.

From round the back of the house to their left emerged, in like silence, a large, moulting, yellow dog. They could hardly even hear the patter of its large feet on the composition flagstones.

Hilary said nothing until the dog, which originally they saw head on, had turned and, with apparent indifference to them, displayed the full length of its right flank. Then he spoke: "Bogey," he said, "that's the same dog." Callcutt was known to his intimates as Bogey, following some early incident in his military life.

Callcutt thought before speaking. Then he said: "Rubbish, Hilary. Dogs don't live twenty years." But he wasn't quite sure of that.

"That one has."

But now the dog began to bark, growling and baying most frighteningly, though, as on the previous occasion, not coming right up to the gate, or attempting to charge at them. If the fact that, a moment before, it seemed

not to have seen them, might have been attributed to extreme senility, there was nothing remotely senile about its furious, almost rabid aggression now; and even less, perhaps, about the calculating way it placed itself, whatever might have been the reason. It stood a shapeless, sulphurous mass on its precisely chosen ground, almost like a Chinese demon.

"That is just what it did before," Hilary shouted above the uproar. "Stood like that and came no nearer."

"If you can call it standing," Callcutt shouted back.

He was appalled by the dog, and did not fail to notice that Hilary had turned white, and was clinging to the decorative gatebars. But in the end Callcutt looked upwards for a second. He spoke again, or rather shouted. "There's a wench at one of the upstairs windows. We'd better clear out."

Before Hilary had managed any reply, which the barking of the dog in any case made difficult, there was a further development. The glass-panelled front door of the house opened, and a woman walked out.

Perhaps she had emerged to quiet the dog and apologize, perhaps, on the contrary, to reinforce the dog's antagonism to strangers: to Hilary it was a matter of indifference. The woman was of about his own age, but he knew perfectly well who she was. She was the grown-up Mary Rossiter, who twenty years before had been killed by a dog, probably a mad dog, possibly a dog that had been shot, certainly a most unusual dog, this very present dog, in fact.

Whatever he felt like, Hilary did not pass out. "Do you mind if we go?"

He withdrew his gaze and, without really waiting for Callcutt, began to walk away sharply. Again, it was somewhat as on the previous occasion: veritably, he was behaving exactly as a small boy might behave.

He did not pace out along the rough road, past the houses. Instead, he walked straight into the dilapidated public forest. Callcutt had almost to run after him, in a rather absurd way.

Hilary could not be unaware that while he retreated, the dog had stopped its noise. Perhaps he had even gone far enough to have passed beyond earshot, though it seemed unlikely. None the less, it was quite a chase for Callcutt, and with the most uncomfortable overtones.

Hilary pulled himself together quite quickly, however—once more, as before; and was even able to tell Callcutt exactly what he had apprehended—or, as he put it to Callcutt, fancied.

"I'd have taken to my heels myself, I promise you that," said Callcutt.

"I know it was Mary," said Hilary. "I know it."

They remained silent for some time as they walked over the patchy, tired ground.

Then Callcutt spoke. There was something he could not keep to himself, and Hilary seemed all right now.

"You know how we were laughing about the names of those houses? Samandjane, and Pasadena, and Happy Hours, and all that; the executive style. Do you know what the doggy house is called?"

Hilary shook his head. "I forgot to look."

"You wouldn't believe it. The name above our heads was Maryland."

The Hospice (1975)

It was somewhere at the back of beyond. Maybury would have found it difficult to be more precise.

He was one who, when motoring outside his own territory, preferred to follow a route "given" by one of the automobile organizations, and, on this very occasion, as on other previous ones, he had found reasons to deplore all deviation. This time it had been the works manager's fault. The man had not only poured ridicule on the official route, but had stood at the yard gate in order to make quite certain that Maybury set off by the short cut which, according to him, all the fellows in the firm used, and which departed in the exactly opposite direction.

The most that could be said was that Maybury was presumably at the outer edge of the immense West Midlands conurbation. The outer edge it by now surely must be, as he seemed to have been driving for hours since he left the works, going round and round in large or small circles, asking the way and being unable to understand the answers (when answers were vouchsafed), all the time seemingly more off-course than ever.

Maybury looked at his watch. He had been driving for hours. By rights he should have been more than halfway home—considerably more. Even the dashboard light seemed feebler than usual; but by it Maybury saw that soon he would be out of petrol. His mind had not been on that particular matter of petrol.

Dark though it was, Maybury was aware of many trees, mountainous and opaque. It was not, however, that there were no houses. Houses there must be, because on both sides of the road, there were gates; broad single gates, commonly painted white: and, even where there were no gates, there were dim entrances. Presumably it was a costly nineteenth-century housing estate. Almost identical roads seemed to curve away in all directions. The straightforward had been genteelly avoided. As often in such places, the racer-through, the taker of a short cut, was quite systematically penalized.

Probably this attitude accounted also for the failure to bring the street lighting fully up-to-date.

Maybury came to a specific bifurcation. It was impossible to make any reasoned choice, and he doubted whether it mattered much in any case.

Maybury stopped the car by the side of the road, then stopped the engine in order to save the waning petrol while he thought. In the end, he opened the door and stepped out into the road. He looked upwards. The moon and stars were almost hidden by the thick trees. It was quiet. The houses were set too far back from the road for the noise of the television sets to be heard, or the blue glare thereof seen. Pedestrians are nowadays rare in such a district at any hour, but now there was no traffic either, nor sound of traffic more remote. Maybury was disturbed by the silence.

He advanced a short distance on foot, as one does at such times. In any case, he had no map, but only a route, from which he had departed quite hopelessly. None the less, even that second and locally preferred route, the one used by all the fellows, had seemed perfectly clear at the time, and as the manager had described it. He supposed that otherwise he might not have been persuaded to embark upon it; not even overpersuaded. As things were, his wonted expedient of merely driving straight ahead until one found some definite sign or other indication, would be dubious, because the petrol might run out first.

Parallel with each side of each road was a narrow made-up footway, with a central gravelly strip. Beyond the strip to Maybury's left was a wilderness of vegetation, traversed by a ditch, beyond which was the hedge-line of the different properties. By the light of the occasional street-lamp, Maybury could see that sometimes there was an owner who had his hedge trimmed, and sometimes an owner who did not. It would be futile to walk any further along the road, though the air was pleasantly warm and aromatic. There were Angela and their son, Tony, awaiting him; and he must resume the fight to rejoin them.

Something shot out at him from the boskage on his left.

He had disturbed a cat, returned to its feral habitude. The first he knew of it was its claws, or conceivably its teeth, sunk into his left leg. There had been no question of ingratiation or cuddling up. Maybury kicked out furiously. The strange sequel was total silence. He must have kicked the cat a long way, because on the instant there was no hint of it. Nor had he seen the colour of the cat, though there was a pool of light at that point on the footway. He fancied he had seen two flaming eyes, but he was not sure even of that. There had been no mew, no scream.

Maybury faltered. His leg really hurt. It hurt so much that he could not bring himself to touch the limb, even to look at it in the lamplight.

He faltered back to the car, and, though his leg made difficulties even in starting it, set off indecisively down the road along which he had just walked. It might well have become a case of its being wise for him to seek a hospital. The deep scratch or bite of a cat might well hold venom, and it was not pleasant to think where the particular cat had been treading, or what it might have been devouring. Maybury again looked at his watch. It was fourteen minutes past eight. Only nine minutes had passed since he had looked at it last.

The road was beginning to straighten out, and the number of entrances to diminish, though the trees remained dense. Possibly, as so often happens, the money had run out before the full development had reached this region of the property. There were still occasional houses, with entries at long and irregular intervals. Lamp posts were becoming fewer also, but Maybury saw that one of them bore a hanging sign of some kind. It was most unlikely to indicate a destination, let alone a destination of use to Maybury, but he eased and stopped none the less, so urgently did he need a clue of some kind. The sign was shaped like a club in a pack of cards, and read:

THE HOSPICE

GOOD FARE

SOME ACCOMMODATION

The modest words relating to accommodation were curved round the downward pointing extremity of the club.

Maybury decided almost instantly. He was hungry. He was injured. He was lost. He was almost without petrol.

He would enquire for dinner and, if he could telephone home, might even stay the night, though he had neither pyjamas nor electric razor. The gate, made of iron, and more suited, Maybury would have thought, to a farmyard bullpen, was, none the less, wide open. Maybury drove through.

The drive had likewise been surfaced with rather unattractive concrete, and it appeared to have been done some time ago, since there were now many potholes, as if heavy vehicles passed frequently. Maybury's headlights bounced and lurched disconcertingly as he proceeded, but suddenly the drive, which had run quite straight, again as on a modern farm, swerved, and there, on Maybury's left, was The Hospice. He realized that the drive he had come down, if indeed it had been a drive, was not the original main entrance. There was an older, more traditional drive, winding away between rhododendron bushes. All this was visible in bright light from a fixture high above the cornice of the building: almost a floodlight, Maybury thought. He supposed that a new entry had been made for the vehicles of the various suppliers when the place had became—whatever exactly it had become, a private hotel? a guest house? a club? No doubt the management aspired to cater for the occupants of the big houses, now that there were no longer servants in the world.

Maybury locked the car and pushed at the door of the house. It was a solid Victorian door, and it did not respond to Maybury's pressure. Maybury was discouraged by the need to ring, but he rang. He noticed that there was a second bell, lower down, marked NIGHT. Surely it could not yet be Night? The great thing was to get in, to feed (the works had offered only packeted sandwiches and flavourless coffee by way of luncheon), to ingratiate himself: before raising questions of petrol, whereabouts, possible accommodation for the night, a telephone call to Angela, disinfectant for his leg. He did not much care for standing alone in a strange place under the bright floodlight, uncertain what was going to happen.

But quite soon the door was opened by a lad with curly fair hair and an untroubled face. He looked like a young athlete, as Maybury at once thought. He was wearing a white jacket and smiling helpfully.

"Dinner? Yes, certainly, sir. I fear we've just started, but I'm sure we can fit you in."

To Maybury, the words brought back the seaside boarding houses where he had been taken for holidays when a boy. Punctuality in those days had been almost as important as sobriety.

"If you can give me just a couple of minutes to wash..."

"Certainly, sir. This way, please."

Inside, it was not at all like those boarding houses of Maybury's youth. Maybury happened to know exactly what it *was* like. The effect was that produced by the efforts of an expensive and, therefore, rather old-fashioned, furniture emporium if one placed one's whole abode and most of one's cheque-book in its hands. There were hangings on all the walls, and every chair and sofa was upholstered. Colours and fabrics were harmonious but rich. The several standard lamps had immense shades. The polished tables derived from Italian originals. One could perhaps feel that a few upholstered occupants should have been designed and purveyed to harmonize also. As it was, the room was empty, except for the two of them.

The lad held open the door marked "Gentlemen" in script, but then followed Maybury in, which Maybury had not particularly expected. But the lad did not proceed to fuss tiresomely, with soap and towel, as happens sometimes in very expensive hotels, and happened formerly in clubs. All he did was stand about. Maybury reflected that doubtless he was concerned to prevent all possible delay, dinner having started.

The dining-room struck Maybury, immediately he entered, as rather too hot. The central heating must be working with full efficiency. The room was lined with hangings similar to those Maybury had seen in the hall, but apparently even heavier. Possibly noise reduction was among the objects. The ceiling of the room had been brought down in the modern manner, as if

to serve the stunted; and any window or windows had disappeared behind swathes.

It is true that knives and forks make a clatter, but there appeared to be no other immediate necessity for costly noise abatement, as the diners were all extremely quiet; which at first seemed the more unexpected in that most of them were seated, fairly closely packed, at a single long table running down the central axis of the room. Maybury soon reflected, however, that if he had been wedged together with a party of total strangers, he might have found little to say to them either.

This was not put to the test. On each side of the room were four smaller tables, set endways against the walls, every table set for a single person, even though big enough to accommodate four, two on either side; and at one of these, Maybury was settled by the handsome lad in the white jacket.

Immediately, soup arrived.

The instantaneity of the service (apart from the fact that Maybury was late) could be accounted for by the large number of the staff. There were quite certainly four men, all, like the lad, in white jackets; and two women, both in dark blue dresses. The six of them were noticeably deft and well set-up, though all were past their first youth.

Maybury could not see more because he had been placed with his back to the end wall which contained the service door (as well as, on the other side, the door by which the guests entered from the lounge). At every table, the single place had been positioned in that way, so that the occupant saw neither the service door opening and shutting, nor, in front of him, the face of another diner.

As a matter of fact, Maybury was the only single diner on that side of the room (he had been given the second table down, but did not think that anyone had entered to sit behind him at the first table); and, on the other side of the room, there was only a single diner also, he thought, a lady, seated at the second table likewise, and thus precisely parallel with him.

There was an enormous quantity of soup, in what Maybury realized was an unusually deep and wide plate. The amplitude of the plate had at first been masked by the circumstance that round much of its wide rim was inscribed, in large black letters, THE HOSPICE; rather in the style of a baby's plate, Maybury thought, if both lettering and plate had not been so immense. The soup itself was unusually weighty too: it undoubtedly contained eggs as well as pulses, and steps have been taken to add "thickening" also.

Maybury was hungry, as has been said, but he was faintly disconcerted to realize that one of the middle-aged women was standing quietly behind him as he consumed the not inconsiderable number of final spoonfuls. The spoons seemed very large also, at least for modern usages. The woman removed his empty plate with a reassuring smile.

The second course was there. As she set it before him, the woman spoke confidentially in his ear of the third course: "It's turkey tonight." Her tone was exactly that in which promise is conveyed to a little boy of his favourite dish. It was as if she were Maybury's nanny; even though Maybury had never had a nanny, not exactly. Meanwhile, the second course was a proliferating elaboration of pasta; plainly homemade pasta, probably fabricated that morning. Cheese, in fairly large granules, was strewn across the heap from a large porcelain bowl without Maybury being noticeably consulted.

"Can I have something to drink? A lager will do."

"We have nothing like that, sir." It was as if Maybury knew this perfectly well, but she was prepared to play with him. There might, he thought, have been some warning that the place was unlicensed.

"A pity," said Maybury.

The woman's inflections were beginning to bore him; and he was wondering how much the rich food, all palpably fresh, and homegrown, and of almost unattainable quality, was about to cost him. He doubted very much whether it would be sensible to think of staying the night at The Hospice.

"When you have finished your second course, you may have the opportunity of a word with Mr Falkner." Maybury recollected that, after all, he had started behind all the others. He must doubtless expect to be a little hustled while he caught up with them. In any case, he was not sure whether or not the implication was that Mr Falkner might, under certain circumstances, unlock a private liquor store.

Obviously it would help the catching-up process if Maybury ate no more than two-thirds of the pasta fantasy. But the woman in the dark blue dress did not seem to see it like that.

"Can't you eat any more?" she enquired baldly, and no longer addressing Maybury as sir.

"Not if I'm to attempt another course," replied Maybury, quite equably.

"It's turkey tonight," said the woman. "You know how turkey just slips down you?" She still had not removed his plate.

"It's very good," said Maybury firmly. "But I've had enough."

It was as if the woman were not used to such conduct, but, as this was no longer a nursery, she took the plate away.

There was even a slight pause, during which Maybury tried to look round the room without giving an appearance of doing so. The main point seemed to be that everyone was dressed rather formally: all the men in "dark suits", all the women in "long dresses". There was a wide variety of age, but, curiously again, there were more men than women. Conversation still seemed far from general. Maybury could not help wondering whether the solidity of the diet did not contribute here. Then it occurred to him that it was as if most of these people had been with one another for a long time, during which things to talk about might have run out, and possibly with little opportunity for renewal through fresh experience. He had met that in hotels. Naturally, Maybury could not, without seeming rude, examine the one-third of the assembly which was seated behind him.

His slab of turkey appeared. He had caught up, even though by cheating. It was an enormous pile, steaming slightly, and also seeping slightly with a colourless, oily fluid. With it appeared five separate varieties of vegetable in separate dishes, brought on a tray; and a sauceboat, apparently for him alone, of specially compounded fluid, dark red and turgid. A sizeable mound of stuffing completed the repast. The middle-aged woman set it all before him swiftly but, this time, silently, with unmistakable reserve.

The truth was that Maybury had little appetite left. He gazed around, less furtively, to see how the rest were managing. He had to admit that, as far as he could see, they were one and all eating as if their lives depended on it: old as well as young, female as well as male; it was as if all had spent a long, unfed day in the hunting field. "Eating as if their lives depended on it," he said again to himself; then, struck by the absurdity of the phrase when applied to eating, he picked up his knife and fork with resolution.

"Is everything to your liking, Mr Maybury?"

Again he had been gently taken by surprise. Mr Falkner was at his shoulder: a sleek man in the most beautiful dinner jacket, an instantly ameliorative màitre d'hôtel.

"Perfect, thank you," said Maybury. "But how did you know my name?"

"We like to remember the names of all our guests, " said Falkner, smiling.

"Yes, but how did you find out *my* name in the first place?"

"We like to think we are proficient at that too, Mr Maybury."

"I am much impressed," said Maybury. Really he felt irritated (irritated, at least), but his firm had trained him never to display irritation outside the family circle.

"Not at all," said Falkner genially. "Whatever our vocation in life, we may as well do what we can to excel." He settled the matter by dropping the subject. "Is there anything I can get for you? Anything you would like?"

"No, thank you very much. I have plenty."

"Thank *you*, Mr Maybury. If you wish to speak to me at any time, I am normally available in my office. Now I will leave you to the enjoyment of your meal. I may tell you, in confidence, that there is steamed fruit pudding to follow."

He went quietly forward on his round of the room, speaking to perhaps one person in three at the long, central table; mainly, it seemed, to the older people, as was no doubt to be expected. Falkner wore very elegant black suede shoes, which reminded Maybury of the injury to his own leg, about which he had done nothing, though it might well be septic, even endangering the limb itself, perhaps the whole system.

He was considerably enraged by Falkner's performance about his name, especially as he could find no answer to the puzzle. He felt that he had been placed, almost deliberately, at an undignified disadvantage. Falkner's patronizing conduct in this trifling matter was of a piece with the nannying attitude of the waitress. Moreover, was the unexplained discovery of his name such a trifle, after all? Maybury felt that it had made him vulnerable in other matters also, however undefined. It was the last straw in the matter of his eating any more turkey. He no longer had any appetite whatever.

He began to pass everything systematically through his mind, as he had been trained to do; and almost immediately surmised the answer. In his car was a blue-bound file which on its front bore his name: "Mr Lucas Maybury"; and this file he supposed that he must have left, name-upwards, on the driving seat, as he commonly did. All the same, the name was merely typed on a sticky label, and would not have been easy to make out through the car window. But he then remembered the floodlight. Even so, quite an effort had been necessary on someone's part, and he wondered who had made that effort. Again he guessed the answer: it was Falkner himself who had been snooping. What would Falkner have done if Maybury had parked the car outside the floodlighted area, as would have been perfectly possible? Used a torch? Perhaps even skeleton keys?

That was absurd.

And how much did the whole thing matter? People in business often had these little vanities, and often had he encountered them. People would do almost anything to feed them. Probably he had one or two himself. The great thing when meeting any situation was to extract the essentials and to concentrate upon them.

To some of the people Falkner was speaking for quite a period of time, while, as Maybury noticed, those seated next to them, previously saying little in most cases, now said nothing at all, but confined themselves entirely to eating. Some of the people at the long table were not merely elderly, he had observed, but positively senile: drooling, watery-eyed, and almost hairless; but even they seemed to be eating away with the best. Maybury had the horrid idea about them that eating was all they did do. "They lived for eating": another nursery expression, Maybury reflected; and at last he had come upon those of whom it might be true. Some of these people might well relate to rich foods as alcoholics relate to excisable spirits. He found it more nauseating than any sottishness; of which he had seen a certain amount.

Falkner was proceeding so slowly, showing so much professional consideration, that he had not yet reached the lady who sat by herself parallel with Maybury, on the other side of the room. At her Maybury now stared more frankly. Black hair reached her shoulders, and she wore what appeared to be a silk evening dress, a real "model", Maybury thought (though he did not really know), in many colours; but her expression was of such sadness, suffering, and exhaustion that Maybury was sincerely shocked, especially as once she must, he was sure, have been beautiful, indeed, in a way, still was. Surely so unhappy, even tragic, a figure as that could not be ploughing through a big slab of turkey with five vegetables? Without caution or courtesy, Maybury half rose to his feet in order to look.

"Eat up, sir. Why you've hardly started!" His tormentor had quietly returned to him. What was more, the tragic lady *did* appear to be eating.

"I've had enough. I'm sorry, it's very good, but I've had enough."

"You said that before, sir, and, look, here you are, still eating away." He knew that he had, indeed, used those exact words. Crises are met by clichés.

"I've eaten quite enough."

"That's not necessarily for each of us to say, is it?"

"I want no more to eat of any kind. Please take all this away and just bring me a black coffee. When the time comes, if you like. I don't mind waiting." Though Maybury did mind waiting, it was necessary to remain in control.

The woman did the last thing Maybury could have expected her to do. She picked up his laden plate (he had at least helped himself to everything) and, with force, dashed it on the floor. Even then the plate itself did not break, but gravy and five vegetables and rich stuffing spread across the thick, patterned, wall-to-wall carpet. Complete, in place of comparative, silence followed in the whole room; though there was still, as Maybury even then observed, the muted clashing of cutlery. Indeed, his own knife and fork were still in his hands.

Falkner returned round the bottom end of the long table.

"Mulligan," he asked, "how many more times?" His tone was as quiet as ever. Maybury had not realized that the alarming woman was Irish.

"Mr Maybury," Falkner continued. "I entirely understand your difficulty. There is naturally no obligation to partake of anything you do not wish. I am only sorry for what has happened. It must seem very poor service on our part. Perhaps you would prefer to go into our lounge? Would you care simply for some coffee?"

"Yes," said Maybury, concentrating upon the essential. "I should, please. Indeed, I had already ordered a black coffee. Could I possibly have a pot of it?"

He had to step with care over the mess on the floor, looking downwards. As he did so, he saw something most curious. A central rail ran the length of the long table a few inches above the floor. To this rail, one of the male guests was attached by a fetter round his left ankle.

Maybury, now considerably shaken, had rather expected to be alone in the lounge until the coffee arrived. But he had no sooner dropped down upon one of the massive sofas (it could easily have seated five in a row, at least two of them stout), than the handsome boy appeared from somewhere and proceeded merely to stand about, as at an earlier phase of the evening. There were no illustrated papers to be seen, nor even brochures about Beautiful Britain, and Maybury found the lad's presence irksome. All the same, he did not quite dare to say, "There's nothing I want." He could think of nothing to say or to do; nor did the boy speak, or seem to have anything particular to do either. It was obvious that his presence could hardly be required there when everyone was in the dining room. Presumably they would soon be passing on to fruit pudding. Maybury was aware that he had yet to pay his bill. There was a baffled but considerable pause.

Much to his surprise, it was Mulligan who in the end brought him the coffee. It was a single cup, not a pot; and even the cup was of such a size that Maybury, for once that evening, could have done with a bigger. At once he divined that coffee was outside the regime of the place, and that he was being specially compensated, though he might well have to pay extra for it. He had vaguely supposed that Mulligan would have been helping to mop up in the dining-room. Mulligan, in fact, seemed quite undisturbed.

"Sugar, sir?" she said.

"One lump, please," said Maybury, eyeing the size of the cup.

He did not fail to notice that, before going, she exchanged a glance with the handsome lad. He was young enough to be her son, and the glance might mean anything or nothing.

While Maybury was trying to make the most of his meagre coffee and to ignore the presence of the lad, who must surely be bored, the door from the dining-room opened, and the tragic lady from the other side of the room appeared.

"Close the door, will you?" she said to the boy. The boy closed the door, and then stood about again, watching them.

"Do you mind if I join you?" the lady asked Maybury.

"I should be delighted."

She was really rather lovely in her melancholy way, her dress was as splendid as Maybury had supposed, and there was in her demeanour an element that could only be called stately. Maybury was unaccustomed to that.

She sat, not at the other end of the sofa, but at the centre of it. It struck Maybury that the rich way she was dressed might almost have been devised to harmonize with the rich way the room was decorated. She wore complicated, oriental-looking earrings, with pink translucent stones, like rosé diamonds (perhaps they *were* diamonds); and silver shoes. Her perfume was heavy and distinctive.

"My name is Cécile Céliména," she said. "How do you do? I am supposed to be related to the composer, Chaminade."

"How do you do?" said Maybury. "My name is Lucas Maybury, and my only important relation is Solway Short. In fact, he's my cousin."

They shook hands. Her hand was very soft and white, and she wore a number of rings, which Maybury thought looked real and valuable (though he could not really tell). In order to shake hands with him, she turned the whole upper part of her body towards him.

"Who is that gentleman you mention?" she asked.

"Solway Short? The racing motorist. You must have seen him on the television."

"I do not watch the television."

"Quite right. It's almost entirely a waste of time."

"If you do not wish to waste time, why are you at The Hospice?"

The lad, still observing them, shifted, noticeably, from one leg to the other.

"I am here for dinner. I am just passing through."

"Oh! You are going then?"

Maybury hesitated. She was attractive and, for the moment, he did not wish to go. "I suppose so. When I've paid my bill and found out where I can get some petrol. My tank's almost empty. As a matter of fact, I'm lost. I've lost my way."

"Most of us here are lost."

"Why here? What makes you come here?"

"We come for the food and the peace and the warmth and the rest."

"A tremendous *amount* of food, I thought."

"That's necessary. It's the restorative, you might say."

"I'm not sure that I quite fit in," said Maybury. And then he added: "I shouldn't have thought that you did either."

"Oh, but I do! Whatever makes you think not?" She seemed quite anxious about it, so that Maybury supposed he had taken the wrong line.

He made the best of it. "It's just that you seem a little different from what I have seen of the others."

"In what way, different?" she asked, really anxious, and looking at him with concentration.

"To start with, more beautiful. You are very beautiful," he said, even though the lad was there, certainly taking in every word.

"That is kind of you to say." Unexpectedly she stretched across the short distance between them and took his hand. "What did you say your name was?"

"Lucas Maybury."

"Do people call you Luke?"

"No, I dislike it. I'm not a Luke sort of person."

"But your wife can't call you Lucas?"

"I'm afraid she does." It was a fishing question he could have done without.

"Lucas? Oh no, it's such a cold name." She was still holding his hand.

"I'm very sorry about it. Would you like me to order you some coffee?"

"No, no. Coffee is not right; it is stimulating, wakeful, overexerting, unquiet." She was gazing at him again with sad eyes.

"This is a curious place," said Maybury, giving her hand a squeeze. It was surely becoming remarkable that none of the other guests had yet appeared.

"I could not live without The Hospice," she replied.

"Do you come here often?" It was a ludicrously conventional form of words.

"Of course. Life would be impossible otherwise. All those people in the world without enough food, living without love, without even proper clothes to keep the cold out."

During dinner it had become as hot in the lounge, Maybury thought, as it had been in the dining-room.

Her tragic face sought his understanding. None the less, the line she had taken up was not a favourite of his. He preferred problems to which solutions were at least possible. He had been warned against the other kind.

"Yes," he said. "I know what you mean, of course."

"There are millions and millions of people all over the world with no clothes at all," she cried, withdrawing her hand.

"Not quite," Maybury said, smiling. "Not quite that. Or not yet."

He knew the risks perfectly well, and thought as little about them as possible. One had to survive, and also to look after one's dependents.

"In any case," he continued, trying to lighten the tone, "that hardly applies to you. I have seldom seen a more gorgeous dress."

"Yes," she replied with simple gravity. "It comes from Rome. Would you like to touch it?"

Naturally, Maybury would have liked, but, equally naturally, was held back by the presence of the watchful lad.

"Touch it," she commanded in a low voice. "God, what are you waiting for? Touch it." She seized his left hand again and forced it against her warm, silky breast. The lad seemed to take no more and no less notice than of anything else.

"Forget. Let go. What is life for, for God's sake?" There was a passionate earnestness about her which might rob any such man as Maybury of all assessment, but he was still essentially outside the situation. As a matter of fact, he had never in his life lost all control, and he was pretty sure by now that, for better or for worse, he was incapable of it.

She twisted round until her legs were extended the length of the sofa, and her head was on his lap, or more precisely on his thighs. She had moved so deftly as not even to have disordered her skirt. Her perfume wafted upwards.

"Stop glancing at Vincent," she gurgled up at him. "I'll tell you something about Vincent. Though you may think he looks like a Greek God, the simple fact is that he hasn't got what it takes, he's impotent."

Maybury was embarrassed, of course. All the same, what he reflected was that often there were horses for courses, and often no more to be said about a certain kind of situation than that one thing.

It did not matter much what he reflected, because when she had spoken, Vincent had brusquely left the room through what Maybury supposed to be the service door.

"Thank the Lord," he could not help remarking naïvely.

"He's gone for reinforcements," she said. "We'll soon see."

Where were the other guests? Where, by now, could they be? All the same, Maybury's spirits were authentically rising, and he began caressing her more intimately.

Then, suddenly, it seemed that everyone was in the room at once, and this time all talking and fussing.

She sat herself up, none too precipitately, and with her lips close to his ear, said, "Come to me later. Number 23."

It was quite impossible for Maybury to point out that he was not staying the night in The Hospice.

Falkner had appeared.

"To bed, all," he cried genially, subduing the crepitation on the instant.

Maybury, unentangled once more, looked at his watch. It seemed to be precisely ten o'clock. That, no doubt, was the point. Still it seemed very close upon a heavy meal.

No one moved much, but no one spoke either.

"To bed, all of you," said Falkner again, this time in a tone which might almost be described as roguish. Maybury's lady rose to her feet.

All of them filtered away, Maybury's lady among them. She had spoken no further word, made no further gesture.

Maybury was alone with Falkner.

"Let me remove your cup," said Falkner courteously.

"Before I ask for my bill," said Maybury, "I wonder if you could tell me where I might possibly find some petrol at this hour?"

"Are you out of petrol?" enquired Falkner.

"Almost."

"There's nothing open at night within twenty miles. Not nowadays. Something to do with our new friends, the Arabs, I believe. All I can suggest is that I syphon some petrol from the tank of our own vehicle. It is a quite large vehicle and it has a large tank."

"I couldn't possibly put you to that trouble." In any case, he, Maybury, did not know exactly how to do it. He had heard of it, but it had never arisen before in his own life.

The lad, Vincent, reappeared, still looking pink, Maybury thought, though it was difficult to be sure with such a glowing skin. Vincent began to lock up; a quite serious process, it seemed, rather as in great-grandparental days, when prowling desperadoes were to be feared.

"No trouble at all, Mr Maybury," said Falkner. "Vincent here can do it easily, or another member of my staff."

"Well," said Maybury, "if it would be all right. . ."

"Vincent," directed Falkner, "don't bolt and padlock the front door yet. Mr Maybury intends to leave us."

"Very good," said Vincent, gruffly.

"Now if we could go to your car, Mr Maybury, you could then drive it round to the back. I will show you the way. I must apologise for putting you to this extra trouble, but the other vehicle takes some time to start, especially at night."

Vincent had opened the front door for them.

"After you, Mr Maybury," said Falkner.

Where it had been excessively hot within, it duly proved to be excessively cold without. The floodlight had been turned off. The moon had "gone in", as Maybury believed the saying was; and all the stars had apparently gone in with it.

Still, the distance to the car was not great. Maybury soon found it in the thick darkness, with Falkner coming quietly step by step behind him.

"Perhaps I had better go back and get a torch?" remarked Falkner.

So there duly was a torch. It brought to Maybury's mind the matter of the office file with his name on it, and, as he unlocked the car door, there the file was, exactly as he had supposed, and, assuredly, name uppermost. Maybury threw it across to the back seat.

Falkner's electric torch was a heavy service object which drenched a wide area in cold, white light.

"May I sit beside you, Mr Maybury?" He closed the offside door behind him.

Maybury had already turned on the headlights, torch or no torch, and was pushing at the starter, which seemed obdurate.

It was not, he thought, that there was anything wrong with it, but rather that there was something wrong with him. The sensation was exactly like a nightmare. He had of course done it hundreds of times, probably thousands of times; but now, when after all it really mattered, he simply could not manage it, had, quite incredibly, somehow lost the simple knack of it. He often endured bad dreams of just this kind. He found time with part of his mind to wonder whether this was not a bad dream. But it was to be presumed not, since now he did not wake, as we soon do when once we realize that we are dreaming.

"I wish I could be of some help," remarked Falkner, who had shut off his torch, "but I am not accustomed to the make of car. I might easily do more

harm than good." He spoke with his usual bland geniality.

Maybury was irritated again. The make of car was one of the commonest there is: trust the firm for that. All the same, he knew it was entirely his own fault that he could not make the car start, and not in the least Falkner's. He felt as if he were going mad. "I don't quite know what to suggest," he said; and added: "If, as you say, there's no garage."

"Perhaps Cromie could be of assistance," said Falkner. "Cromie has been with us quite a long time and is a wizard with any mechanical problem."

No one could say that Falkner was pressing Maybury to stay the night, or even hinting towards it, as one might expect. Maybury wondered whether the funny place was not, in fact, full up. It seemed the most likely answer. Not that Maybury wished to stay the night: far from it.

"I'm not sure," he said, "that I have the right to disturb anyone else."

"Cromie is on night duty," replied Falkner. "He is always on night duty. That is what we employ him for. I will fetch him."

He turned on the torch once more, stepped out of the car, and disappeared into the house, shutting the front door behind him, lest the cold air enter.

In the end, the front door reopened, and Falkner re-emerged. He still wore no coat over his dinner suit, and seemed to ignore the cold. Falkner was followed by a burly but shapeless and shambling figure, whom Maybury first saw indistinctly standing behind Falkner in the light from inside the house.

"Cromie will soon put things to rights," said Falkner, opening the door of the car. "Won't you, Cromie?" It was much as one speaks to a friendly retriever.

But there was little, Maybury felt, that was friendly about Cromie. Maybury had to admit to himself that on the instant he found Cromie alarming, even though, what with one thing and another, there was little to be seen of him.

"Now what exactly seems wrong, Mr Maybury?" asked Falkner. "Just tell Cromie what it is."

Falkner himself had not attempted to re-enter the car, but Cromie forced himself in and was sprawling in the front seat, next to Maybury, where Angela normally sat. He really did seem a very big, bulging person, but Maybury decisively preferred not to look at him, though the glow cast backwards from the headlights provided a certain illumination.

Maybury could not acknowledge that for some degrading reason he was unable to operate the starter, and so had to claim there was something wrong with it. He was unable not to see Cromie's huge, badly misshapen, yellow hands, both of them, as he tugged with both of them at the knob, forcing it in and out with such violence that Maybury cried out: "Less force. You'll wreck it."

"Careful, Cromie," said Falkner from outside the car. "Most of Cromie's work is on a big scale," he explained to Maybury.

But violence proved effective, as so often. Within seconds, the car engine was humming away.

"Thank you very much," said Maybury.

Cromie made no detectable response, nor did he move.

"Come on out, Cromie," said Falkner. "Come on out of it."

Cromie duly extricated himself and shambled off into the darkness.

"Now," said Maybury, brisking up as the engine purred. "Where do we go for the petrol?"

There was the slightest of pauses. Then Falkner spoke from the dimness outside. "Mr Maybury, I have remembered something. It is not petrol that we have in our tank. It is, of course, diesel oil. I must apologise for such a stupid mistake."

Maybury was not merely irritated, not merely scared: he was infuriated. With rage and confusion he found it impossible to speak at all. No one in the modern world could confuse diesel oil and petrol in that way. But what could he possibly do?

Falkner, standing outside the open door of the car, spoke again. "I am extremely sorry, Mr Maybury. Would you permit me to make some amends by inviting you to spend the night with us free of charge, except perhaps for the dinner?"

Within the last few minutes Maybury had suspected that this moment was bound to come in one form or another.

"Thank you," he said less than graciously. "I suppose I had better accept."

"We shall try to make you comfortable," said Falkner.

Maybury turned off the headlights, climbed out of the car once more, shut and, for what it was worth, locked the door, and followed Falkner back into the house. This time Falkner completed the locking and bolting of the front door that he had instructed Vincent to omit.

"I have no luggage of any kind," remarked Maybury, still very much on the defensive.

"That may solve itself," said Falkner, straightening up from the bottom bolt and smoothing his dinner jacket. "There's something I ought to explain. But will you first excuse me a moment?" He went out through the door at the back of the lounge.

Hotels really have become far too hot, thought Maybury. It positively addled the brain.

Falkner returned. "There is something I ought to explain," he said again. "We have no single rooms, partly because many of our visitors prefer not to be alone at night. The best we can do for you in your emergency, Mr Maybury, is to offer you the share of a room with another guest. It is a large room and there are two beds. It is a sheer stroke of good luck that at present

there is only one guest in the room, Mr Bannard. Mr Bannard will be glad of your company, I am certain, and you will be quite safe with him. He is a very pleasant person, I can assure you. I have just sent a message up asking him if he can possibly come down, so that I can introduce you. He is always very helpful, and I think he will be here in a moment. Mr Bannard has been with us for some time, so that I am sure he will be able to fit you up with pyjamas and so forth."

It was just about the last thing that Maybury wanted from any point of view, but he had learned that it was of a kind that is peculiarly difficult to protest against, without somehow putting oneself in the wrong with other people. Besides he supposed that he was now committed to a night in the place, and therefore to all the implications, whatever they might be, or very nearly so.

"I should like to telephone my wife, if I may," Maybury said. Angela had been steadily on his mind for some time.

"I fear that's impossible, Mr Maybury," replied Falkner. "I'm so sorry."

"How can it be impossible?"

"In order to reduce tension and sustain the atmosphere that our guests prefer, we have no external telephone. Only an internal link between my quarters and the proprietors."

"But how can you run an hotel in the modern world without a telephone?"

"Most of our guests are regulars. Many of them come again and again, and the last thing they come for is to hear a telephone ringing the whole time with all the strain it involves."

"They must be half round the bend," snapped Maybury, before he could stop himself.

"Mr Maybury," replied Falkner, "I have to remind you of two things. The first is that I have invited you to be our guest in the fuller sense of the word. The second is that, although you attach so much importance to efficiency, you none the less appear to have set out on a long journey at night with very

little petrol in your tank. Possibly you should think yourself fortunate that you are not spending the night stranded on some motorway."

"I'm sorry," said Maybury, "but I simply must telephone my wife. Soon she'll be out of her mind with worry."

"I shouldn't think so, Mr Maybury," said Falkner smiling. "Concerned, we must hope; but not quite out of her mind."

Maybury could have hit him, but at that moment a stranger entered.

"Ah, Mr Bannard," said Falkner, and introduced them. They actually shook hands. "You won't mind, Mr Bannard, if Mr Maybury shares your room?"

Bannard was a slender, bony little man, of about Maybury's age. He was bald, with a rim of curly red hair. He had slightly glaucous grey-green eyes of the kind that often go with red hair. In the present environment, he was quite perky, but Maybury wondered how he would make out in the world beyond. Perhaps, however, this was because Bannard was too shrimp-like to look his best in pyjamas.

"I should be delighted to share my room with anyone," replied Bannard. "I'm lonely by myself."

"Splendid," said Falkner coolly. "Perhaps you'd lead Mr Maybury upstairs and lend him some pyjamas? You must remember that he is a stranger to us and doesn't yet know all our ways."

"Delighted, delighted," exclaimed Bannard.

"Well, then," said Falkner. "Is there anything you would like, Mr Maybury, before you go upstairs?"

"Only a telephone," rejoined Maybury, still recalcitrant. He simply did not believe Falkner. No one in the modern world could live without a telephone, let alone run a business without one. He had begun uneasily to wonder if Falkner had spoken the whole truth about the petrol and the diesel fuel either.

"Anything you would like that we are in a position to provide, Mr Maybury?" persisted Falkner, with offensive specificity.

"There's no telephone *here*," put in Bannard, whose voice was noticeably high, even squeaky.

"In that case, nothing," said Maybury. "But I don't know what my wife will do with herself."

"None of us knows that," said Bannard superfluously, and cackled for a second.

"Good-night, Mr Maybury. Thank you, Mr Bannard."

Maybury was almost surprised to discover, as he followed Bannard upstairs, that it seemed a perfectly normal hotel, though overheated and decorated over-heavily. On the first landing was a full-size reproduction of a chieftain in scarlet tartan by Raeburn. Maybury knew the picture, because it had been chosen for the firm's calendar one year, though ever since they had used girls. Bannard lived on the second floor, where the picture on the landing was smaller, and depicted ladies and gentlemen in riding dress taking refreshments together.

"Not too much noise," said Bannard. "We have some very light sleepers amongst us."

The corridors were down to half-illumination for the night watches, and distinctly sinister. Maybury crept foolishly along and almost stole into Bannard's room.

"No," said Bannard in a giggling whisper. "Not Number 13, not yet Number 12 A."

As a matter of fact Maybury had not noticed the number on the door that Bannard was now cautiously closing, and he did not feel called upon to rejoin.

"Do be quiet taking your things off, old man," said Bannard softly. "When once you've woken people who've been properly asleep, you can never quite tell. It's a bad thing to do."

It was a large square room, and the two beds were in exactly opposite corners, somewhat to Maybury's relief. The light had been on when they entered. Maybury surmised that even the unnecessary clicking of switches was to be eschewed.

"That's your bed," whispered Bannard, pointing jocularly.

So far Maybury had removed only his shoes. He could have done without Bannard staring at him and without Bannard's affable grin.

"Or perhaps you'd rather we did something before settling down?" whispered Bannard.

"No, thank you," replied Maybury. "It's been a long day." He was trying to keep his voice reasonably low, but he absolutely refused to whisper.

"To be sure it has," said Bannard, rising to much the volume that Maybury had employed. "Night-night then. The best thing is to get to sleep quickly." His tone was similar to that which seemed habitual with Falkner.

Bannard climbed agilely into his own bed, and lay on his back peering at Maybury over the sheets.

"Hang your suit in the cupboard," said Bannard, who had already done likewise. "There's room."

"Thank you," said Maybury. "Where do I find the pyjamas?"

"Top drawer," said Bannard. "Help yourself. They're all alike."

And, indeed, the drawer proved to be virtually filled with apparently identical suits of pyjamas.

"It's between seasons," said Bannard. "Neither proper summer, nor proper winter."

"Many thanks for the loan," said Maybury, though the pyjamas were considerably too small for him.

"The bathroom's in there," said Bannard.

When Maybury returned, he opened the door of the cupboard. It was a big cupboard and it was almost filled by a long line of (presumably) Bannard's suits.

"There's room," said Bannard once more. "Find yourself an empty hanger. Make yourself at home."

While balancing his trousers on the hanger and suspending it from the rail, Maybury again became aware of the injury to his leg. He had hustled so rapidly into Bannard's pyjamas that, for better or for worse, he had not even looked at the scar.

"What's the matter?" asked Bannard on the instant. "Hurt yourself, have you?"

"It was a damned cat scratched me, " replied Maybury, without thinking very much.

But this time he decided to look. With some difficulty and some pain, he rolled up the tight pyjama leg. It was a quite nasty gash and there was much dried blood. He realized that he had not even thought about washing the wound. In so far as he had been worrying about anything habitual, he had been worrying about Angela.

"Don't show it to me," squeaked out Bannard, forgetting not to make a noise. All the same, he was sitting up in bed and staring as if his eyes would pop. "It's bad for me to see things like that. I'm upset by them."

"Don't worry," said Maybury. "I'm sure it's not as serious as it looks." In fact, he was far from sure; and he was aware also that it had not been quite what Bannard was concerned about.

"I don't want to know anything about it," said Bannard.

Maybury made no reply but simply rolled down the pyjama leg. About his injury too there was plainly nothing to be done. Even a request for Vaseline might lead to hysterics. Maybury tried to concentrate upon the reflection that if nothing worse had followed from the gash by now, then nothing worse might ever follow.

Bannard, however, was still sitting up in bed. He was looking pale. "I come here to forget things like that," he said. "We all do." His voice was shaking.

"Shall I turn the light out?" enquired Maybury. "As I'm the one who's still up?"

"I don't usually do that " said Bannard, reclining once more, none the less. "It can make things unnecessarily difficult But there's you to be considered too."

"It's your room," said Maybury, hesitating.

"All right," said Bannard. "If you wish. Turn it out. Tonight anyway." Maybury did his injured leg no good when stumbling back to his bed. All the same, he managed to arrive there.

"I'm only here for one night," he said more to the darkness than to Bannard. "You'll be on your own again tomorrow. "

Bannard made no reply, and, indeed, it seemed to Maybury as if he were no longer there, that Bannard was not an organism that could function in the dark. Maybury refrained from raising any question of drawing back a curtain (the curtains were as long and heavy as elsewhere), or of letting in a little night air. Things, he felt, were better left more or less as they were.

It was completely dark. It was completely silent. It was far too hot.

Maybury wondered what the time was. He had lost all touch. Unfortunately, his watch lacked a luminous dial.

He doubted whether he would ever sleep, but the night had to be endured somehow. For Angela it must be even harder—far harder. At the best, he

had never seen himself as a first-class husband, able to provide a superfluity, eager to be protective. Things would become quite impossible, if he were to lose a leg. But, with modern medicine, that might be avoidable, even at the worst: he should be able to continue struggling on for some time yet.

As stealthily as possible he insinuated himself from between the burning blankets and sheets on to the surface of the bed. He lay there like a dying fish, trying not to make another movement of any kind.

He became almost cataleptic with inner exertion. It was not a promising recipe for slumber. In the end, he thought he could detect Bannard's breathing, far, far away. So Bannard was still there. Fantasy and reality are different things. No one could tell whether Bannard slept or waked, but it had in any case become a quite important aim not to resume general conversation with Bannard. Half a lifetime passed.

There could be no doubt, now, that Bannard was both still in the room and also awake. Perceptibly, he was on the move. Maybury's body contracted with speculation as to whether Bannard in the total blackness was making towards his corner. Maybury felt that he was only half his normal size.

Bannard edged and groped interminably. Of course Maybury had been unfair to him in extinguishing the light, and the present anxiety was doubtless no more than the price to be paid.

Bannard himself seemed certainly to be entering into the spirit of the situation: possibly he had not turned the light on because he could not reach the switch; but there seemed more to it than that. Bannard could be thought of as committed to a positive effort in the direction of silence, in order that Maybury, the guest for a night, should not be disturbed. Maybury could hardly hear him moving at all, though perhaps it was a gamble whether this was consideration or menace. Maybury would hardly have been surprised if the next event had been hands on his throat.

But, in fact, the next event was Bannard reaching the door and opening it, with vast delicacy and slowness. It was a considerable anticlimax, and not palpably outside the order of nature, but Maybury did not feel fully

reassured as he rigidly watched the column of dim light from the passage slowly widen and then slowly narrow until it vanished with the faint click of the handle. Plainly there was little to worry about, after all, but Maybury had probably reached that level of anxiety where almost any new event merely causes new stress. Soon, moreover, there would be the stress of Bannard's return. Maybury half realized that he was in a grotesque condition to be so upset, when Bannard was, in fact, showing him all possible consideration. Once more he reflected that poor Angela's plight was far worse.

Thinking about Angela's plight, and how sweet, at the bottom of everything, she really was, Maybury felt more wakeful than ever, as he awaited Bannard's return, surely imminent, surely. Sleep was impossible until Bannard had returned.

But still Bannard did not return. Maybury began to wonder whether something had gone wrong with his own time faculty, such as it was; something, that is, of medical significance. That whole evening and night, from soon after his commitment to the recommended route, he had been in doubt about his place in the universe, about what people called the state of his nerves. Here was evidence that he had good reason for anxiety.

Then, from somewhere within the house, came a shattering, ear-piercing scream, and then another, and another. It was impossible to tell whether the din came from near or far; still less whether it was female or male. Maybury had not known that the human organism could make so loud a noise, even in the bitterest distress. It was shattering to listen to; especially in the enclosed, hot, total darkness. And this was nothing momentary: the screaming went on and on, a paroxysm, until Maybury had to clutch at himself not to scream in response.

He fell off the bed and floundered about for the heavy curtains. Some light on the scene there must be; if possible, some new air in the room. He found the curtains within a moment, and dragged back first one, and then the other.

There was no more light than before.

Shutters, perhaps? Maybury's arm stretched out gingerly. He could feel neither wood nor metal.

The light switch. It must be found.

While Maybury fell about in the darkness, the screaming stopped on a ghoulish gurgle: perhaps as if the sufferer had vomited immensely and then passed out; or perhaps as if the sufferer had in mercy passed away altogether. Maybury continued to search.

It was harder than ever to say how long it took, but in the end he found the switch, and the immediate mystery was explained. Behind the drawn-back curtains was, as the children say, just wall. The room apparently had no window. The curtains were mere decoration.

All was silent once more: once more extremely silent. Bannard's bed was turned back as neatly as if in the full light of day.

Maybury cast off Bannard's pyjamas and, as quickly as his state permitted, resumed his own clothes. Not that he had any very definite course of action. Simply it seemed better to be fully dressed. He looked vaguely inside his pocket-book to confirm that his money was still there.

He went to the door and made cautiously to open it and seek some hint into the best thing for him to do, the best way to make off.

The door was unopenable. There was no movement in it at all. It had been locked at the least; perhaps more. If Bannard had done it, he had been astonishingly quiet about it: conceivably experienced.

Maybury tried to apply himself to thinking calmly.

The upshot was that once more, and even more hurriedly, he removed his clothes, disposed of them suitably, and resumed Bannard's pyjamas.

It would be sensible once more to turn out the light; to withdraw to bed, between the sheets, if possible; to stand by, as before. But Maybury found

that turning out the light, the resultant total blackness, were more than he could face, however expedient.

Ineptly, he sat on the side of his bed, still trying to think things out, to plan sensibly. Would Bannard, after all this time, ever, in fact, return? At least during the course of that night?

He became aware that the electric light bulb had begun to crackle and fizzle. Then, with no further sound, it simply failed. It was not, Maybury thought, some final authoritative lights-out all over the house. It was merely that the single bulb had given out, however unfortunately from his own point of view: an isolated industrial incident.

He lay there, half in and half out, for a long time. He concentrated on the thought that nothing had actually happened that was dangerous. Ever since his schooldays (and, indeed, during them) he had become increasingly aware that there were many things strange to him, most of which had proved in the end to be apparently quite harmless.

Then Bannard was creeping back into the dark room. Maybury's ears had picked up no faint sound of a step in the passage, and, more remarkable, there had been no noise, either, of a turned key, let alone, perhaps, of a drawn bolt. Maybury's view of the bulb failure was confirmed by a repetition of the widening and narrowing column of light, dim, but probably no dimmer than before. Up to a point, lights were still on elsewhere. Bannard, considerate as before, did not try to turn on the light in the room. He shut the door with extraordinary skill, and Maybury could just, though only just, hear him slithering into his bed.

Still, there was one unmistakable development: at Bannard's return, the dark room had filled with perfume; the perfume favoured, long ago, as it seemed, by the lady who had been so charming to Maybury in the lounge. Smell is, in any case, notoriously the most recollective of the senses. Almost at once, this time, Bannard not merely fell obtrusively asleep, but was soon snoring quite loudly.

Maybury had every reason to be at least irritated by everything that was happening, but instead he soon fell asleep himself. So long as Bannard was

asleep, he was at least in abeyance as an active factor in the situation; and many perfumes have their own drowsiness, as Iago remarked. Angela passed temporarily from the forefront of Maybury's mind.

Then he was awake again. The light was on once more, and Maybury supposed that he had been awakened deliberately, because Bannard was standing there by his bed. Where and how had he found a new light bulb? Perhaps he kept a supply in a drawer. This seemed so likely that Maybury thought no more of the matter.

It was very odd, however, in another way also.

When Maybury had been at school, he had sometimes found difficulty in distinguishing certain boys from certain other boys. It had been a very large school, and boys do often look alike. None the less, it was a situation that Maybury thought best to keep to himself, at the time and since. He had occasionally made responses or approaches based upon misidentifications: but had been fortunate in never being made to suffer for it bodily, even though he had suffered much in his self-regard.

And now it was the same. Was the man standing there really Bannard? One obvious thing was that Bannard had an aureole or fringe of red hair, whereas this man's fringe was quite grey. There was also a different expression and general look, but Maybury was more likely to have been mistaken about that. The pyjamas seemed to be the same, but that meant little.

"I was just wondering if you'd care to talk for a bit, " said Bannard. One had to assume that Bannard it was; at least to start off with. "I didn't mean to wake you up. I was just making sure."

"That's all right, I suppose," said Maybury.

"I'm over my first beauty sleep," said Bannard. "It can be lonely during the night." Under all the circumstances it was a distinctly absurd remark, but undoubtedly it was in Bannard's idiom.

"What was all that screaming?" enquired Maybury.

"I didn't hear anything," said Bannard. "I suppose I slept through it. But I can imagine. We soon learn to take no notice. There are sleepwalkers for that matter, from time to time."

"I suppose that's why the bedroom doors are so hard to open?"

"Not a bit," said Bannard, but he then added, "Well, partly, perhaps. Yes, partly. I think so. But it's just a knack really. We're not actually locked in, you know." He giggled. "But what makes you ask? You don't need to leave the room in order to go to the loo. I showed you, old man."

So it really must be Bannard, even though his eyes seemed to be a different shape, and even a different colour, as the hard light caught them when he laughed.

"I expect I was sleepwalking myself," said Maybury warily.

"There's no need to get the wind up," said Bannard, "like a kid at a new school. All that goes on here is based on the simplest of natural principles: eating good food regularly, sleeping long hours, not taxing the overworked brain. The food is particularly important. You just wait for breakfast, old man, and see what you get. The most tremendous spread, I promise you."

"How do you manage to eat it all?" asked Maybury. "Dinner alone was too much for me."

"We simply let Nature have its way. Or rather, perhaps, *her* way. We give Nature her head."

"But it's not *natural* to eat so much."

"That's all you know," said Bannard. "What you are old man, is effete." He giggled as Bannard had giggled, but he looked somehow unlike Maybury's recollection of Bannard. Maybury was almost certain there was some decisive difference.

The room still smelt of the woman's perfume; or perhaps it was largely Bannard who smelt of it, Bannard who now stood so close to Maybury. It

was embarrassing that Bannard, if he really had to rise from his bed and wake Maybury up, did not sit down; though preferably not on Maybury's blanket.

"I'm not saying there's no suffering here," continued Bannard. "But where in the world are you exempt from suffering? At least no one rots away in some attic—or wretched bed-sitter, more likely. Here there are no single rooms. We all help one another. What can you and I do for one another, old man?"

He took a step nearer and bent slightly over Maybury's face. His pyjamas really reeked of perfume.

It was essential to be rid of him; but essential to do it uncontentiously. The prospect should accept the representative's point of view as far as possible unawares.

"Perhaps we could talk for just five or ten minutes more," said Maybury, "and then I should like to go to sleep again, if you will excuse me. I ought to explain that I slept very little last night owing to my wife's illness."

"Is your wife pretty?" asked Bannard. "Really pretty? With this and that?" He made a couple of gestures, quite conventional though not aforetime seen in drawing rooms.

"Of course she is," said Maybury. "What do you think?"

"Does she really turn you on? Make you lose control of yourself?"

"Naturally," said Maybury. He tried to smile, to show he had a sense of humour which could help him to cope with tasteless questions.

Bannard now not merely sat on Maybury's bed, but pushed his frame against Maybury's legs, which there was not much room to withdraw, owing to the tightness of the blanket, as Bannard sat on it.

"Tell us about it," said Bannard. "Tell us exactly what it's like to be a married man. Has it changed your whole life? Transformed everything?"

"Not exactly. In any case, I married years ago."

"So now there is someone else. I understand."

"No, actually there is not."

"Love's old sweet song still sings to you?"

"If you like to put it like that, yes. I love my wife. Besides she's ill. And we have a son. There's him to consider too."

"How old is your son?"

"Nearly sixteen."

"What colour are his hair and eyes?"

"Really, I'm not sure. No particular colour. He's not a baby, you know."

"Are his hands still soft?"

"I shouldn't think so."

"Do you love your son, then?"

"In his own way, yes, of course."

"I should love him, were he mine, and my wife too." It seemed to Maybury that Bannard said it with real sentiment. What was more, he looked at least twice as sad as when Maybury had first seen him: twice as old, and twice as sad. It was all ludicrous, and Maybury at last felt really tired, despite the lump of Bannard looming over him, and looking different.

"Time's up for me," said Maybury. "I'm sorry. Do you mind if we go to sleep again?"

Bannard rose at once to his feet, turned his back on Maybury's corner, and went to his bed without a word, thus causing further embarrassment.

It was again left to Maybury to turn out the light, and to shove his way back to bed through the blackness.

Bannard had left more than a waft of the perfume behind him; which perhaps helped Maybury to sleep once more almost immediately, despite all things.

Could the absurd conversation with Bannard have been a dream? Certainly what happened next was a dream: for there was Angela in her nightdress with her hands on her poor head, crying out "Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!" Maybury could not but comply, and in Angela's place, there was the boy, Vincent, with early morning tea for him. Perforce the light was on once more: but that was not a matter to be gone into.

"Good morning, Mr Maybury."

"Good morning, Vincent."

Bannard already had his tea.

Each of them had a pot, a cup, jugs of milk and hot water, and a plate of bread and butter, all set on a tray. There were eight large triangular slices each.

"No sugar," cried out Bannard genially. "Sugar kills appetite."

Perfect rubbish, Maybury reflected; and squinted across at Bannard, recollecting his last rubbishy conversation. By the light of morning, even if it were but the same electric light, Bannard looked much more himself, fluffy red aureole and all. He looked quite rested. He munched away at his bread and butter. Maybury thought it best to go through the motions of following suit. From over there Bannard could hardly see the details.

"Race you to the bathroom, old man," Bannard cried out.

"Please go first," responded Maybury soberly. As he had no means of conveying the bread and butter off the premises, he hoped, with the aid of the towel, to conceal it in his skimpy pyjamas jacket, and push it down the water closet. Even Bannard would probably not attempt to throw his arms round him and so uncover the offence.

Down in the lounge, there they all were, with Falkner presiding indefinably but genially. Wan though authentic sunlight trickled in from the outer world, but Maybury observed that the front door was still bolted and chained. It was the first thing he looked for. Universal expectation was detectable: of breakfast, Maybury assumed. Bannard, at all times shrimpish, was simply lost in the throng. Cécile he could not see, but he made a point of not looking very hard. In any case, several of the people looked new, or at least different. Possibly it was a further example of the phenomenon Maybury had encountered with Bannard.

Falkner crossed to him at once: the recalcitrant but still privileged outsider. "I can promise you a good breakfast, Mr Maybury," he said confidentially. "Lentils. Fresh fish. Rump steak. Apple pie made by ourselves, with lots and lots of cream."

"I mustn't stay for it," said Maybury. "I simply mustn't. I have my living to earn. I must go at once."

He was quite prepared to walk a couple of miles; indeed, all set for it. The automobile organisation, which had given him the route from which he should never have diverged, could recover his car. They had done it for him before, several times.

A faint shadow passed over Falkner's face, but he merely said in a low voice, "If you really insist, Mr Maybury—."

"I'm afraid I have to," said Maybury.

"Then I'll have a word with you in a moment."

None of the others seemed to concern themselves. Soon they all filed off, talking quietly among themselves, or, in many cases, saying nothing.

"Mr Maybury," said Falkner, "you can respect a confidence?"

"Yes," said Maybury steadily.

"There was an incident here last night. A death. We do not talk about such things. Our guests do not expect it."

"I am sorry," said Maybury.

"Such things still upset me," said Falkner. "None the less I must not think about that. My immediate task is to dispose of the body. While the guests are preoccupied. To spare them all knowledge, all pain."

"How is that to be done?" enquired Maybury.

"In the usual manner, Mr Maybury. The hearse is drawing up outside the door even as we speak. Where you are concerned, the point is this. If you wish for what in other circumstances I could call a lift, I could arrange for you to join the vehicle. It is travelling quite a distance. We find that best." Falkner was progressively unfastening the front door. "It seems the best solution, don't you think, Mr Maybury? At least it is the best I can offer. Though you will not be able to thank Mr Bannard, of course."

A coffin was already coming down the stairs, borne on the shoulders of four men in black, with Vincent, in his white jacket, coming first, in order to leave no doubt of the way and to prevent any loss of time.

"I agree," said Maybury. "I accept. Perhaps you would let me know my bill for dinner?"

"I shall waive that too, Mr Maybury," replied Falkner, "in the present circumstances. We have a duty to hasten. We have others to think of. I shall simply say how glad we have all been to have you with us." He held out his hand. "Good-bye, Mr Maybury."

Maybury was compelled to travel with the coffin itself, because there simply was not room for him on the front seat, where a director of the firm, a corpulent man, had to be accommodated with the driver. The nearness of death compelled a respectful silence among the company in the rear compartment, especially when a living stranger was in the midst; and Maybury alighted unobtrusively when a bus stop was reached. One of the undertaker's men said that he should not have to wait long.

The Real Road To The Church (1975)

But was that the true meaning? *Le vrai chemin de l'église?* The overtones of symbolism and conversion seemed clear enough, but Rosa still rather wondered whether the significance of the phrase was not wholly topographical. One could so easily read far too much into the traditional usages of simple people.

Probably all that was meant was the simplest and directest route (and perhaps the ancientest); the alternative to the new (but no longer very new) and metalled main road that wound along the borders of properties, instead of creeping through them. Though by now, Rosa reflected, all roads had begun to barge through once again, and no longer went courteously around and about. Very much so: *that*, she thought, was symbolic, if anything was. Of everything: of the changed world outside and also of her own questionable place in it. But when one began to think in that way, all things become symbolic of all other things. Not that that was in itself untrue: though it was only *one* truth, of course. And when one *admitted* that there were many truths existing concurrently, upon which of them could one possibly be thought to stand firm—let alone, to rest? Almost certainly, the simple people who used that phrase, gave no thought at all to its meaning. It was a convention only, as are the left hand side and the right. Conventions are, indeed, all that shield us from the shivering void, though often they do so but poorly and desperately.

As a matter of fact, Rosa was shivering now as she stood in the living-room of La Wide (if living-room it could yet be called) and thought about the tone in which Mrs Du Quesne, her newly found home help with the aristocratic name, had spoken. Nor was it only Mrs Du Quesne's name that seemed to echo breeding. Rosa had read many books during those years she spent abroad; read them mainly, as it had since seemed to her, while waiting for men to keep some appointment or other; and Mrs Du Quesne had

brought back Tess of the D'Urbervilles to her, though Mrs Du Quesne was far, far older than Tess had been permitted to be.

Rosa's convent French, though presumably reinforced during the year or two she had lived in Paris (but always with men who were English), was of little avail in understanding the island tongue: not so much a patois, she gathered, as a hybrid, a speech half-Latin and half-Norse. At one period, Rosa had lived in Stockholm with an actual Swede (far and away the worst year of her life—or more than a year: it had all ended in her breakdown), but the language of Sweden (and never would she forget the pitch of it) seemed to have nothing whatever in common with the language of Mrs Du Quesne and her friends. If Mrs Du Quesne had not mixed in equal parts of very clear English, Rosa could hardly have employed her. There were not many left who spoke the local tongue at all; but that was a factor which strongly inclined Rosa to employ, and thus, perhaps, aid, those who did. Any resulting difficulty or sacrifice she fervently justified to herself.

Rosa was fairly well aware that it was the more oracular remarks which Mrs Du Quesne and her friends left in their natal hybrid, nor could by any reasonable persuasion be induced to anglicize. She suspected, indeed, that just now she herself had gone somewhat beyond persuasion that was reasonable. She was sure she had begun to croak, when her gullet had suddenly dried around what had been her voice; and that she had pounded several times upon the Du Quesne kitchen table (except that neither table nor kitchen were the words they all used). When it came to the choice, no doubt important in its way, between one three-letter washing powder and another, Mrs Du Quesne spoke plain advertisers' English; but her warnings, or at least admonitions, deeper and more personal to Rosa and her place of abode, were as masked as the gurglings of any ancient oracle. And everyone else in the kitchen that was called something else kept quiet when Mrs Du Quesne said these plainly important things. Probably those sitting around at Delphi fell silent in like circumstances.

And there could be no doubt at all about La Wide having been unoccupied for years and years before she, Rosa, had bought it. The very first thing she had thought when she had set eyes on it had been, It must be haunted, but it had not so far in her occupancy seemed to be so, and the first twelvemonth

was almost over, albeit a casual visitor might not have thought it from the state of the rooms.

The fact that the little structure had been so cheap as to be within Rosa's means had also made her suspect that trouble went with it. She had not been so unsophisticated as not to think of that. But during the year she had realized that on this point the answer might lie elsewhere.

The explanation, she had come to suspect, lay in the present social categorization of the island population. First, there were the few immensely old families, who dwelt in crumbling châteaux, within weedy moats. Second, there were the tax refugees from the British mainland: sad, very loud-voiced people in once-fashionable clothes, who seemed not to have houses at all, but to reside always in not quite compatible bars and restaurants, never truly drunk, never truly sober. Third, there was the great residential majority: the prosperous growers, their suppliers and agents. These lived in new or rehabilitated bungalows or houses, frantically competitive, each with all the others. Finally, there were the few real natives or aboriginals; and they had so diminished in number under the weight of all the others, or of the times in general, that they no longer needed more than a proportion of the cots and crofts built for them, mostly in the solidest, most enduring stone. The first three groups would not have considered La Wide, and the fourth had no need of it. The end of the tomato boom was said to be imminent, but in that event, those who trimmed and watered it would migrate not to La Wide but more probably to the Antipodes.

Moreover, La Wide was to be reached only by a bumpy and neglected track running uphill between hedges: difficult for a baby carriage, impossible for a saloon car. It was, in fact, this track that had initiated the dark talk from Mrs Du Quesne and her group; Rosa having expressed concern about the difficulty Mrs Du Quesne might find in making her way during the season of winter wet that once more lay ahead. (Rosa had arrived the previous October, but then, and right through that winter, there had been no Mrs Du Quesne in her life.)

Rosa, still shivering, sank upon a chair by the small fireplace as she thought about what had been said; though, as far as she was concerned, but

slenderly understood. I am far too sensitive, she thought, for the five hundredth or one thousandth time; though words had never been necessary to frame the thought. She was in such distress (surely, this time, without full justification) that she might have gone on to think I am mad, and thus derive some faint, familiar comfort from the implication of non-responsibility for what happened to her and of escape, but instead was struck by the idea that, in this case, the word "sensitive" might require to be applied in a new meaning.

Dennis, fifteen years ago, had said at first that he thought she might be "a sensitive", and indeed claimed that it was one reason why he was "interested in her". He always professed a special concern with such things, and could certainly talk without end about them, though perhaps without much meaning either. He had, however, quite soon found an Indo-Chinese girl who was far more of a sensitive, and was believed, in so far as you could believe anything about Dennis, to have started living with her instead. Already, Dennis had explained to Rosa that being "*a* sensitive" had nothing at all to do with being "sensitive" in the ordinary meaning of the word. Rosa had thought this just as well in all the circumstances, and had summoned resolution to exclude all notion of herself owning any special psychic status. She had hardly thought about it again until now. If I *am* sensitive in that way, she thought, then the Du Quesne lot may have sensed it. Whenever she visited Mrs Du Quesne's abode, which she had found herself doing surprisingly frequently, she discovered a small crowd of kindred and affinity mumbling their confused lingo in the non-kitchen. "The Du Quesne lot" were fast becoming an over-wise chorus in the background of her own life: and perhaps edging towards the front of it.

Though it was already the end of October, there was no fire in the grate. This was partly because it was so difficult to get coal. Apparently the tomato-houses required almost all that was imported. The previous winter, Rosa had frozen for as long as eight or nine weeks before she had obtained a supply by making one of her scenes in the merchant's office. She had then received a whole ton, almost immediately, carried by a pair of youths in half-hundredweight sacks all the way up her lumpy lane from the road: which made her wonder whether coal was really so short, after all. Quite probably it was one of the many necessities only to be procured by such as

she through resort to degrading devices. Rosa was unsure whether she did not prefer to endure the cold. Then she reasoned with herself that winter had of course not even begun, and that even autumn was less than half gone. She rose, went through to the back room, her bedroom and boudoir, removed her sweater, glanced in the looking-glass at the reflection of her bust, as she always did, and put on a thicker, chunkier sweater. The room was rather sad and dark, because the single window was close to the bank of earth which rose behind almost perpendicularly. Probably the room had been intended for "the children", while Father and Mother slept in the room adjoining, which was now Rosa's unfinished living-room; and all had lived their waking lives in the remaining room, into which the outer door led, and which had now become Rosa's kitchen and scullery only. Rosa entered this kitchen and scullery, and started to slice up materials for a meal.

But that day it was her first meal her mother could possibly have called "real", and it had the effect, with the coffee that followed it, of concentrating Rosa's perceptions. Mrs Du Quesne had left her with much to be surmised, but the facts, or rather the claims, were clear, even though the overtones and explanations might not be.

It had begun when Mrs Du Quesne, in a friendly way, had been answering one of the others who had apparently enquired for details as to where Rosa resided. "Ah," the other woman had blurted out, "it is there that they change the porters." Patois or hybrid the tongue might be, but Rosa could understand that much. "What porters?" she had enquired, her mind full of French railway stations. There had been a pause and a silence, and then something evasive had been said, though doubtless kindly meant. "No," Rosa had cried, the scent of mischief full in her nostrils. "I want to know. Please tell me." Mrs Du Quesne then said something much firmer, and perhaps in a less kindly tone; and soon Rosa was beginning to lose control, in the way she now regretted. So, in the end, Mrs Du Quesne did tell some of it, out of resentment or out of necessity. Mrs Du Quesne explained certain aspects of the matter, while the others inserted quiet or excited comments in their vernacular.

All over the island, Mrs Du Quesne had said, all over the island when one knew, were these paths: *"les vrais chemins de l'église"*. It was the way one

went to one's church—when one knew. Several other things were said that Rosa had not comprehended. There was another pause and then the nub of the matter was hinted at: by these paths one also went to one's grave. Along these paths one's body was borne; and not only did such a path find its way past La Wide, so that each time the burden must pass within inches of Rosa's front door, but La Wide was also one of the places where, as she had heard already, "they changed the porters". Great significance seemed to be attached to that. And everyone made it clear that to make one's last journey by any other route was most inappropriate. Words were used to describe the consequences which, though few, were impressive, so awed and reluctant was their utterance, so charged the silence that followed them. Rosa had no precise idea what these words meant, but they had made those dead who were unquiet, almost visible and tangible in Mrs Du Quesne's homestead.

"But," Rosa had, in the end, cried out, "but I have never heard *anything*." She thought that at this point she had actually clutched at Mrs Du Quesne's sleeve.

"No," Mrs Du Quesne had replied, very simply and memorably. "Until now you hadn't the knowledge." And everyone was again silent after she had spoken.

Rosa could not see how that could possibly make any difference. Either these dreary corteges went past, in which case she would have surely seen at least one of them in a whole year; or they did not, and she had somehow missed the whole point.

"And whatever happens," said Mrs Du Quesne rather loudly, "if you *do* hear, don't look." Everyone continued silent; not one of them even nodding.

And what was more, she had learned nothing further. There had been some more talk, either in the difficult tongue, or else merely silly. Soon, Rosa had stalked out.

Now she looked around at the half-completed repainting and the miscellany of furniture brought from her room in London. It had been costly to move, of course, but it was certainly not true that it would have been cheaper to buy new furniture on the island. New furniture might have been more

agreeable and more appropriate, but it would finally have emptied Rosa's financial store. As for the painting, she had set about doing it herself for the same reason, and because she thought it would give her something to do before she started looking for a thing that was better, but had been surprised by the physical effort involved, and, some time ago, had desisted until she had more strength. By now, she had ceased to notice the result for most of the time, though at this moment she did notice it. Properly, as she well knew, she could not afford even Mrs Du Quesne, but truly she could not do *everything*, and Mrs Du Quesne also provided a certain company—cheerful and confident company for much of the time. Besides, Mrs Du Quesne cost very little.

That, indeed, was why it had been possible to employ her, when a woman requiring the open market rate would have been out of the question; but at this moment it struck Rosa for the first time that Mrs Du Quesne's cheapness was like the cheapness of the house: slightly unnatural. Unaccustomed cheapness is something that takes much explanation in the world around us. It occurred to Rosa that perhaps she, Rosa, was beginning to regret having come at all, and that all these new difficulties and apprehensions were, as Dennis used to say, "projections". Nothing had been more familiar to Rosa than the sensation of early regret for almost every step she had ever taken; but this time she had thought that she had evaded the demon, even though perhaps by also managing to evade herself, for nearly a whole year. Where just now Rosa had undoubtedly been frightened, the notion that her external alarums had emanated, as so often, from inside her, left her merely depressed.

She looked at her reflection, though only in the glass of the sitting-room window. The light was just right for the purpose, and even the grime helped to define her image. Certainly it was all the definition she wanted. She had always found life to move by contraries, usually petty ones, though sometimes not; and, as often before when she had been depressed, now found herself surprised that she looked as well as she did. She had long ago learned that it was when she had been feeling more confident that the sight of her appearance came always as something of a shock. Life evens things up or down; in small matters and in large (even though Rosa would have hesitated to distinguish between the two). Now she felt quite pleased. Her

figure was still noticeably good, or at least well proportioned; and the thick, chunky sweater was in her right style. Even her face was still pretty, she thought, beneath the grey hair. At least she had the decency to keep her grey hair short: but then there had been a man who positively liked, and chose, short grey hair—though that, for better or for worse, had been when her own hair was neither, but carroty and rather long. Still, long grey hair always looked greasy and witch-like; and at once she thought anew of Mrs Du Quesne, though Mrs Du Quesne's hair was not grey at all, but quite black. And my skin is amazingly good for my age, Rosa thought to herself. (She had long ago made a decision to defer *talking* to herself for as long as she could.) She attempted a smile, though she knew it could only be a bitter one, at least for the most part. But it proved to be not so much a bitter smile, as a timid and frightened smile. She was smiling like a shaky adolescent. And then the image in the dirty window lost shape and identity. Rosa turned away, once more depressed.

She took down her coat from one of the pegs at the back of the door on to the lane and set out for a walk. It was a respectable and even an expensive coat. Rosa still spent far more on clothes than on "the home"—or, indeed, on anything else that was in the least optional. And they were ladylike, conventional clothes that she picked, though simpler than the convention, because she had taste. Though her adult life had so far divided into two phases, neither of them especially ladylike, she had felt from first to last that her appearance must always show what she *really* was. And now that she had entered upon a third phase, this limbo at La Wide, she divined that her appearance was almost all she was left with. It was something that need never fail her while she had two pennies to rub together, and had mercifully little to do with the quite independent aspect of her naked body, provided that she did not allow her grey hair to grow long and greasy, or her hands to go too far in the direction of, say, Mrs Du Quesne's hands. With determination, she would be able to do something with her appearance until the last day came . . . She twisted her mind away from the thought of the morning's conversation.

Rosa was winding her way along the cliff path, high and narrow above the autumnal billows (they are as grey as hair, thought Rosa); steeply up and vertiginously down, both billows and path. Rosa walked not fast but

steadily: the cliff path ran for many miles, and was exceedingly wild and beautiful, recalling what the cliff paths of England were, the coastguard paths, well within living memory. The ascents and descents, beyond either the powers or the will of the ordinary visitor, meant little to Rosa; but then the beauty and the wildness meant little to her either, and the windblown cliff flora, the jagged, streaky geology, nothing at all. All these different things entered her awareness only vaguely. Almost every day, she went slowly on and on, in her good clothes; passing others, persons from the car parks behind, and men with guns, without acknowledgement of any kind, without one half-step aside, assuredly without a smile. "She looks just like a ghost," the women said, not understanding that she might conceivably have been one. "Didn't she look pale?" enquired other women rhetorically of their bored husbands. Rosa was one whom the weather affected little. "She looks like a mad-woman," the bored husbands would sometimes reply. "Perhaps she's searching for something," a girl might interpose more sympathetically. And the crushing answer would come: "Most likely searching for her wits".

Rosa had thus walked for miles along the cliff path almost each day during all but a year, but now she soon began to feel tired and settled herself on a rough bench. She sat staring out to sea for possibly half an hour; letting the heavy waves erode her misery and break up her despair. Then a figure in black appeared on the path in the opposite direction to that from which she had come. A tall elderly man struggled forward against the wind. As he drew near, Rosa saw that he was in clerical dress, without an overcoat, and with his big black hat in his hand. His white hair was sparse and windblown. He stopped in front of Rosa and she looked up. Her first thought was: a sensitive face.

"Good afternoon," said the man. "I believe you are Mrs Hughes."

"Yes," said Rosa. "I am."

"You have bought the little house at the place where they change the porters? At least I assume that you have bought it."

"Yes," said Rosa. "I admit it."

"You are seeking peace?"

"Aren't we all?" The cheap words had sprung to her lips on some volition of their own.

"Yes, Mrs Hughes. Indeed, we all are. Indeed."

Rosa said nothing. She felt that any words she could find would be likewise unworthy of her; would show her in an unjust light. It was a long time since she had conversed with any "educated person".

"Perhaps I might sit beside you for a moment?"

Rosa nodded and, as one does, drew the skirt of her coat more closely to her.

"And what was your life before you came here? If you care to speak of it, of course."

"For the last eight years, I was a secretary. Then the manager sent for me and told me I was past being a secretary with *that* company, but that he had arranged for me to be transferred to the handling side. I said No."

"I am sure you were wise," said the man. "And what happened to you before the last eight years?" Both of them were staring straight ahead across the pulsing, empty sea.

"Before that I was seeing more of life."

"Did you prefer that?"

"No," replied Rosa. "I disliked both times," and, when he said nothing, she spoke again. "Who are *you*?"

"I am the curate in charge of your parish. I too am retired, but I come here every autumn in order to permit your rector to rest. He is very elderly, even more so than I am, and, alas very infirm indeed, as I expect you know."

"No," said Rosa, once more defiant, as always when confronted with any kind of official demand. "I don't go to church."

"Possibly not," said the man. "But then you have no need to."

"I wonder how you know," said Rosa, cheaper than ever, and misunderstanding.

"You already live in a holy place."

"What's that?" asked Rosa, her heart in a sudden vice.

"I myself should not dare to live there."

"Tell me," said Rosa, with all the stolidity she could muster. "What exactly is there that I should be afraid of?"

"It is not a matter of anything to fear in the usual sense. It is a spiritual matter."

"As how? I don't know about such things."

"Oh," he said. "Where were you educated?"

"In a convent," she replied, more quietly. "But I've long ago forgotten everything I was taught."

He replied in a murmur, as if to himself. "I can hear the beating of your heart."

But having said that, he said nothing more, while Rosa sat waiting, almost peacefully, for whatever might befall.

"I come here daily," he said in the end. "I like to contemplate the immensity. There is a lack of immensity in the world. Do you find that also?"

"Yes," said Rosa. "I suppose I do. But I don't look very much for it. I don't look very much for anything."

"It is perhaps odd," he continued, "that we have not met until now. I believe that you too walk along the cliff."

"Yes," said Rosa. "And I may have passed you without noticing. I do that often."

"I think I should have noticed *you*" he said, as if seriously thinking about it.

Rosa noticed that upon the grey sea was now the beginning of a black shadow.

"This," she remarked, "is when my mother would have said 'The days are drawing in'."

"Yes," he replied. "Soon we shall have to light the lamp before tea-time."

A sea bird descended from the blackening clouds, screaming and searching.

"You haven't told me," said Rosa. "This thing about changing the porters. People seem to keep talking about it. It sounds rather pointless to me. And, anyway, it doesn't happen. I've been there nearly a year and it hasn't happened yet, as far as I know."

"Perhaps you have not known what to look for and to listen for. The porters are changed very quietly. No one speaks. No one grumbles. Surely you have not been given the impression that they go by shouting, like a trade union march?"

"I have to admit," said Rosa, taking the plunge, "that I never heard about it at all until this morning, and then only from my char, if that is what I should call her. She said the great thing was if I *did* hear anything, not to look for what it was."

"It is a disturbing sight for those unaccustomed to death and the hereafter: which is most of the world around us, as I need hardly say. I think that you are one, Mrs Hughes, who could not only listen and look, but kneel and touch with impunity."

"Do I really want to?" asked Rosa, turning to him completely for the first time.

"Oh, yes, indeed, Mrs Hughes," he replied. "To kneel and to touch are the proper practices of the pilgrim. That must be one of the things you have temporarily forgotten."

"As with saints and relics and so forth?"

He smiled at her for the first time.

"But what should I get out of it?" She blushed. "No, I don't quite mean that. What I mean is why me? Why should I be supposed to do it more than another?"

"Because, Mrs Hughes, your whole life has been a quest for perfection. You have always been concerned only with perfection, and as in this world there is no perfection, you are sad. Sadness can be a very special—shall I say, concession?"

"I am sure the nuns used to tell us it was a sin."

"As with so many things, it depends upon what kind of sadness it is."

"Do you know," said Rosa impulsively, "I'm not sure that you haven't changed my entire afternoon!"

"Where you now live," he replied, "there was for centuries a shrine with an image; and before that, probably on the very same spot, another image, very different and yet in important ways just the same; and, before that—who knows?—perhaps the goddess herself, *in propria persona*, if you will permit the words. Needless to say, no one could behold the goddess herself in her grove and continue to live. That is possible only when the divine is provisionally mediated into man."

"For a clergyman you seem to take stock in an awful lot of different gods."

"There is only one."

"Yes," she said. "I see that too. At least I do now. You seem to make me understand things that I never understood before. And yet you don't say anything that's in the least new."

"Daily life is entirely a matter of the pattern men and women impose upon it: of style, as the artist calls it. And the character of that pattern is very important, as day follows day. None the less, reality lies far behind, and is unchangeable: is ritual, in fact. It was of reality, I suspect, that your charwoman was speaking—perhaps gossiping. Reality is often dangerous, so she was cautioning you to avoid it."

"And you?"

"I advise you to advance towards it. When you hear the faint sounds I spoke of, throw open your door and see what there is to see. Fall upon your knees and stretch out your hand, as I said. And of course be prepared for a big change; something indescribable, unpredictable."

"I have no idea what you are talking about," said Rosa slowly.

"Few have. My general reputation in the parish is that of a complete visionary. I am said to go around upsetting people. Not that many care one way or the other." On the instant, he rose to his feet. "But now I must return to them. I am very glad indeed to have met you, Mrs Hughes." As he could not lift his hat, he waved it vaguely around. She had a few seconds in which to examine his full face closely.

"I understand almost nothing you have said, " Rosa repeated. "And yet you have made me feel much better. Thank you."

She would have gone after him along the cliff path, had he proposed it, but he did not. He merely bowed slightly and strode rapidly away. For a minute or so in the dusk, she could see his long black shape flickering and capering like a scrap of burned paper blown along by the wind, but soon he was no longer visible.

A heavy raindrop fell upon the back of her left hand. She looked up. The sky was now really black, with a blackness that was not entirely of the

oncoming night. There was nothing to do but make the best speed possible homewards. But though she scuttled along more swiftly than for a long time, she failed to glimpse the shape ahead of the man who had been speaking to her. The visibility was so poor as to make the rough path almost dangerous; and when Rosa at last re-entered La Wide, her good clothes and she herself were saturated more completely than ever before in her life, save perhaps once, that day in the Bois de Vincennes, of all places, with Dennis. People looked down their noses at the Bois de Vincennes, but when the rain began, it had proved astonishingly wild and shelterless. Then Rosa recalled that she was wrong. The man with whom she had shared a soaking had not been Dennis but Michael: vile, bloody, deceitful, dear old Mike.

There was no electricity at La Wide. For lighting she depended upon lamps, exactly as her new acquaintance had said; and the oil supply for them had been another of the wearing nuisances which she hoped that Mrs Du Quesne would be able to deal with better than she had. At least, she, Rosa, would not have to listen to the supplier's patronizing comments upon her backward and impoverished existence. But now, before lighting a lamp, she stripped off all her clothes in the almost total darkness and flung them about the floor.

Dennis, Michael, Oskar, Ted, Tom, Frank, Gwyn, and Elvington: those were some of the names, and what comic names they were! Rosa ignited a pair of lamps, then lined the men up in her mind. It was possibly the first time ever that she had deliberately done so, and, perhaps for that reason, some of the names had no proper faces, and certain other faces that she saw, peering and intruding from the darker areas, had no names. And after those days, during her years of respectable and responsible business life, there had been virtually no men at all; assuredly none with power over her. She took out an unused bath towel and rubbed herself vigorously. Then she put on another sweater and a pair of trousers, which she seldom wore; and over them her thick winter dressing gown. All these things felt pleasantly new, one after the other. The dressing gown she had had cleaned during the summer, so that it smelt impersonally of chemicals. The file of men had soon vanished; without even being dismissed. It was as if on their own they had marched away into life's battle and failed to return.

What had happened to them: to them as individuals? It was another thought upon which Rosa had seldom dwelt. In almost every case, her final and consuming idea had been simply to get away, and to drag her sagging heart away also. She had sought to avoid all thought of the man's continuing existence. And then when another man had appeared, it had been even more important not to reflect much upon the past. All she could now recollect was that Elvington, poor weak American boy, had destroyed himself with the contents of a killing bottle, though not on her account, but whole years later; and that big, fat Oskar had been actually killed, Scandinavian-style, in a fight, and a fight that was at least partly about her. Afterwards she had collapsed completely, very completely; and had had to be fetched back to England "under sedation" (and as cheaply as possible) by her half-sister, Judith. Frank was supposed to have perished in a car smash outside Bolton, where he had, at rather long last, found a job of some kind. It was her room-mate, Agnes, who had told her that, and professed herself willing to swear to it; but one could not rely upon Agnes even when she probably *wished* to speak the truth. Agnes had also said that Frank had been married only a week before the accident . . . All the rest of them were quite possibly still alive. Rosa wondered how many of them would reach Heaven, and how many of their respective women, and what would happen to them all then. She was still not seeing them standing in a line, as they had been doing, ten, twenty, or thirty minutes ago. Rosa had often noticed that such inner visions come upon one apparently unsolicited; soon vanish; and can by no effort be recaptured. She uncrossed her legs and said out loud: "We control nothing of importance that happens to us."

She realized that she had not yet rubbed her hair, except to prevent it actually dripping upon her dry clothes. The new towel was soaking wet and quite unsuitable. She took out another new towel, leaving but one more on the pile. Seated on a hard chair, she rubbed away at her head, feeling active and effective. Then she had to consider what to do with two wringing wet towels, and several very humid garments. It really was not cold enough to justify the lighting of a fire. Rosa felt so full of vigour that she almost regretted this. She settled for ranging the wet objects upon strings which she stretched round the room. Fortunately, several pegs and hooks had been left behind in odd places, to which the strings could be tied; but the total effect was unconvincing, and more than a little eerie. There were new shadows,

some of them vast; and intermittent small shiftings and flappings. I feel penned in by wet vampire bats, thought Rosa; but, as a matter of fact, the feeling was far more alarming than that, and far less specific.

"This is my hour of trial," said Rosa. "It is like nothing that has gone before." She realized that she was disregarding her strong resolve not to soliloquize out loud before she positively could not help herself. Perhaps, she thought, but did not say, this is where I *cannot* help myself. She closed her eyes, to shut out the big, frightening bats. She crossed her arms over her bosom, placing a hand upon each opposite shoulder. She started to breathe very deeply and regularly: formally terminating the period of short gasps and panting that had attended her scrambling rush for home, and the self-pummelings and retchings that had necessarily followed. Soon she found that her crossed arms weighed upon her lungs, so that, while mysteriously glad that she had passed through that position, she fell away, letting her hands fade in her lap.

There were clocks, one of which struck the hours and the half-hours; there was a cricket, which, so late in the year, activated itself for astonishingly long periods; there were the two lamps, in which the oil burned evenly away.

"This is amounting to a wake," said Rosa to herself, as the clock suddenly struck ten. "Not to mention a fast."

Her limbs had become a little stiff, but she was surprised that things were not far worse. She had felt herself to be slightly exalted ever since her conversation on the cliffs, and this unreasonable restlessness seemed to confirm it.

AH the same, she moved to a more comfortable chair. "Why ever not?" she enquired vaguely, and once more aloud. She noticed that the rain had stopped. Perhaps it had stopped hours ago.

The room seemed peculiarly warm. "Perhaps delusions are setting in." Rosa had read about explorers marooned on icefloes who dreamed of the Savoy Grill. Ted had once worked as a waiter in a place like that, as she was

unlikely to forget—though, as a waiter, Ted was understood to be rather good. Rosa cast off her dressing gown.

The clock struck half past ten, eleven, and half past eleven. Rosa was now half-asleep for much of the time. She had abandoned all idea of special preparation for what lay ahead. She lay empty and resigned.

Some time after that, the flame in both lamps began to flicker and waver. Rosa had filled the lamps herself and knew well that they held enough oil to last through two nights and more. But she rose to her feet very conventionally, in order to make an inspection. Immediately, the two lamps went out. The flame in both seemed to vanish at exactly the same moment, as if by pre-arrangement.

Rosa realized that, in the dark, her brow was covered with moisture. She was uncertain whether this was fear, or a medical consequence of her previous soaking, or simply the temperature of the room. Certainly the room was quite unaccountably hot.

Then Rosa became aware that behind the patterned curtains she had drawn across the two windows before throwing off her clothes, was now a gleam that seemed more than the contrast between the blackness of the room and the perhaps slightly more luminous night outside. Moreover, it was as if the gleam were moving. The faint light was strengthening, as, presumably, it moved towards her.

So far she had heard nothing but the ticking of the clock; and now she ceased to hear even that. She had not noted the clock's last tick. She simply realized that it was ticking no longer.

"Oh God," said Rosa, "please protect me." She had not chosen either the words or the voice. She had, in fact, no idea where they had come from. She sank, not upon her knees, but in a heap on the floor, burying her face between her legs, and holding her hands over her ears. She seemed to squat, in desperate discomfort, for an appreciable time. In an earlier year, she had known something like that hopeless, inhuman posture when she had been so badly seasick—and on more than one occasion—in the Baltic.

Then there was a faint fluttering knock, not necessarily at the outer door. Rosa could not tell where it came from. It might have been made by a small creature which had been entrapped in the room with her.

It seemed worse not to know than to know. Rosa unwound herself. She looked and listened.

There was still not much to hear, but the light had grown strong enough for the shapes she had hung from strings to be dimly and strangely visible. Another new development was, however, that these distorted forms seemed no longer to be entirely within the room, but to continue outside it, as if she could see faintly through the wall. The weak light, moreover, was wanly pink and wanly blue, in a way that not even the pattern of the curtains could entirely account for.

Punching at the wet objects that touched her face and head, Rosa ran for the outer door. Though it too seemed to have become faintly transparent, it opened quite normally. Rosa was in flight, and in flight that was unorganized and demented. No longer was she capable of resignation or acquiescence, let alone of meeting events with anything more positive. But at the doorway, she managed to stop herself. She stood there for a moment, gasping and staring.

She had half expected that the light would be very bright. After all, there had been evidence that it might be.

In fact, however, it was quite faint; only half as bright again, perhaps, as it had been inside the room. Remote might have been the word for the quality of it; even though the source, or seeming source, was almost under Rosa's nose; *le vrai chemin de l'église* not being at all wide. The light came from candles, but, mysteriously, it still manifested that wan pinkness and pale blueness that Rosa had already discerned. "Inexplicable," said Rosa softly, "inexplicable."

It was hard even to guess how many of these candles there were, each giving barely more than the light of a tiny taper, though visibly far sturdier than that. The candles were in the hands of men; and inside the irregular ring the men made, were other men, without candles: the bearers (Rosa

rejected the word "porters"), now in process of being changed. And at the centre of all was that which was being borne: of itself, apparently, not without luminosity.

After Rosa had opened the door, very far from quietly, owing to the clumsiness of her fear, the men on that side of the ring, whether the light-bearers or the burden-bearers, had slowly and gravely moved aside, so that a wide way lay open before her.

Already she was part of it all, and had no refuge. She went delicately and timidly out, stepping like a girl.

And what she saw lying before her, though gilded and decked and perfumed and beflowered as any saint, was the twin, the image, the double of herself. Not even of herself when a girl or of herself when a hag, but, she had no doubt about it, of herself as she was now. On the instant she sank to her knees beside the litter and diffidently touched the hand that lay there, which at once responded with a gentle clasp.

"Who am I?" whispered Rosa. "And who are you?"

"I am your soul," replied a remote voice she did not know.

"But," cried Rosa, "where then are you going?"

"To the church. Where else should a soul go?"

"Shall I see you no more?"

"One day."

"When will that be?"

"I do not know."

"And until then?"

"Live. Forget and live."

"How can I forget? How can anyone? How can anyone *forget*?"

Here Rosa glanced upwards and around her; and the idea passed through her mind that these silent men, all somehow ministering, it was to be supposed, to her soul, might be those same men for whom earlier that evening she had sometimes found names and sometimes found recollections only.

Whatever the truth of that, Rosa's last question found no answer. The new bearers were assuming their task. (Who, Rosa wondered, in that case—if that case were conceivable—could *they* be?) With hands and arms, they had already drawn Rosa away; and now they were raising the litter on to their shoulders. The entire faintly lighted throng were moving on towards the hilltop, where the church had replaced the temple, where the temple had been surrogate for the goddess personally in the grove.

"Farewell." Rosa never knew whether she had actually spoken that word.

Remarkably soon, the rough lane was silent, with all life stilled, and starlessly dark. But Rosa saw through the curtained windows that the lamps inside her living-room burned as usual; and when, not too hurriedly, she went to look and listen, the clock was ticking, and implying that the time was only ten minutes after midnight.

It was no occasion for giving further thought to the problem of the wet clothes. That could wait for the morning, when Rosa would be packing anyway, with a view to returning to London, at least as a first move. It was impossible to know where she would go thereafter.

Niemandswasser (1975)

Shortly after 3 A.M., when the September air was thinly strewn with drizzle, the young Prince Albrecht von Allendorf, known as Elmo to his associates, because of the fire which to them emanated from him, entered the *Tiergarten* from the Liechtensteinallee, leaping over the locked gate; then found his way to the shore of the big lake to his left; and there, in the total darkness, made to shoot himself.

For upwards of an hour he had strode and stumbled, not always by the most direct route, for he was unused to making the journey on foot, northwards from Schöneberg, where within the small, low room in which the two of them were in the long habit of meeting, Elvira Schwalbe still lay across the big bed in her chemise. She was neither happy to be rid of Elmo, this time surely for ever, nor unhappy to have lost him; certainly not dead, which, considering the apparent intensity of Elmo's feelings, was perhaps surprising, but not fully alive either. The principal upshot of it all was a near-paralysis of will and feeling. Thus she was very, very cold, but for many hours made no movement of any kind. Not until the middle of that afternoon did she gather herself together. Then she spent a considerable time making her hair even more beautiful, put on her taffeta dress with the wide grey and white stripes (very wide), locked up the magic apartment for ever and a day, and proceeded round the corner to the *Konditorei*, where she ate more cakes than she would normally have done, and drank more coffee, and even concluded with a concoction of hot eggs, having found herself still hungry. Happy, happy Elvira, renewed, strengthened, and made lovelier than ever by just a little suffering; happy to leave us with the wide world once more spread freely before her from which to pick and choose! *So endet alles.* Later, at a suitable moment, she threw the key of the room into the Spree.

Elmo, the young prince, was perhaps young only by comparison; in that he had four elder brothers, all of whom had always seemed old beyond their years. All were in the army, and all were doing well in their careers, by no means only because of their excellent connections. When not on the parade

ground or manoeuvres, they were at lectures and courses, or even reading military books. All were married to ladies of precise social equilibrium, and all had children, in no case only one, and in every case with boys predominating. Despite the demands of service, there was usually at least one son at Allendorf to support their elderly father in what for most of the year were the daily pleasures of chase and gun. Thus too they in turn learnt to rule; especially, of course, the eldest.

The Hereditary Prince of Allendorf had managed to escape mediatization and still exercised a surprising degree of authority over his moderately-sized patriarchy; neither so small as to be something of a joke, nor so large as to negate the personal touch. The survival of so much individual authority in a changed world was not unconnected with the fact that almost all his subjects loved him; and that in turn was because he was an excellent ruler, carefully reared to it from birth, and completely unselfconscious in his procedures. The few who were dissatisfied made tracks for Berlin in any case. It would be absurd to set about the making of trouble in Allendorf.

The Hereditary Prince had long been a widower (Elmo could hardly remember his mother), but he was well looked after by the Countess Sophie-Anna, long a widow herself, a distant cousin (and her late husband had been another cousin), and still quite attractive, including in some cases to those younger than herself. She resided in a large, rococo house, just across the Schlossplatz. When she had first arrived, the elder boys had been doubtful, but Elmo, aged ten, and very tired of masterful matrons (and not yet called Elmo), had fallen for her completely, and could hardly be kept out of her abode, where, among other things, and when opportunity offered, he stole away and, in awe and wonder, went repeatedly through the soft dresses and perfumed underclothes in her bedroom presses and closets. Things were much less formal and ordered than in the Schloss, and no one here ever thought to say him nay in anything. None the less, Schloss Allendorf itself was a beautiful and romantic structure, fantastic as a dream; and the Hereditary Prince took care that the aged, the apparently sempiternal Emperor was as often as practicable his guest.

As well as the Allendorfpalast in Berlin, quite near to where Elmo now sat in darkness, the family properties included, confusingly, a second, and

much older, Schloss Allendorf, this time on the shores of Lake Constance, the Bodensee. No senior member of the family had seemingly found the time to go there since the present Hereditary Prince, when a quite small child, had spent a week there with his father. This apparently universal family indifference to the place was normal enough behaviour, but, in the present instance, it happens that there was a specific reason for it: some particular thing (of which details were never disclosed) had happened when the quite small child had visited the Schloss, which had had the effect of his never either being taken there again, or himself wanting to go there when he had become his own master. His attitude influenced those around him, his family and others, without, probably, a word being ever clearly spoken. Probably few of those affected were accustomed to showing much enterprise in such matters as visiting remote family properties in any case. There were elderly dependables to look after the place, year in and year out, and that sufficed.

Elmo alone formed a habit of going there, incognito, or as near to that as could be managed. He had been drawn in the first place by the knowledge that it was from this semi-ruinous lakeside congeries that his family, which was a family to be proud of, had come to importance at the beginning. The family were too closely knit for his elder brothers ever to be actually unkind to him, but, undeniably, there were differences, and Elmo found it particularly felicitous that at almost any time he could withdraw from father and brothers and the wives and children of brothers, to a spot where there was no element of betrayal or disloyalty, and which was of such wondrous beauty also.

If, when the moon is shining and near the full, you scull over, alone, or with some single quietly beloved and beautiful person, from Konstanz, past the Staad peninsula with its lighthouse, to Meersburg, you will experience a peace and acceptance of all things that the wider oceans of the world cannot offer. For some of the time, the scale seems to be maritime, with land, at such an hour, almost out of sight, even beneath the moon; but all the while you are conscious that the smooth and silky water is not saline but the current of the great Rhine, newly released from the Alps. And, of course, there is the clear air; the Bodensee being set at 400 metres above the restless sea. Every ripple is poetry and every zephyr a tender release.

Naturally, Elmo, as well as his brothers, was in the army; but in his case more ornamentally, as was still possible, though becoming less so. In the course of his service, he had met Viktor, whose position in the world was perfectly accommodable to his own (Viktor's father commanded the guard in one of the kingdoms); and in Viktor for the first time he had found a friend who actually enhanced (instead of slightly spoiling and diminishing) the experience of boating on the lake, more often than not at night. Viktor, who was olive-skinned and black-haired, sometimes dressed as a girl for this purpose, and it was as if Elmo had mysteriously, albeit but momentarily, acquired the sister he had so much lacked.

One night or early morning when the circumstances were such, there was an odd episode. Viktor was trailing his hand in the water while Elmo worked intermittently at the sculls. It was hard to tell where exactly they were on the lake. This is always one of the most delightful things on the Bodensee, in that the agreeable uncertainty contains little element of actual risk: soon one always sees land somewhere, sometimes all too soon. But that night or early morning, a risk did emerge, unexpectedly, devastatingly, and literally; because the hand that the relaxed Viktor was gently trailing through the water was, with all quiet around, suddenly bitten half away. He lost his fourth and fifth fingers altogether, and, even when the doctors had finished, was left without a portion of his hand—and, worse still, of his right hand, with which he wrote his verses and fingered the strings of his guitar. Furthermore, the experience had a marked emotional effect also: one proof of which was that Elmo and Viktor quarrelled.

Even so, Viktor, who had resigned his commission (he was offered a job of consequence in an army office, but declined it—as henceforth he was to decline most things); Viktor, then, seemed to commit himself to sitting in solitude and without occupation, each day and every day, on the Bodensee shore. He was not always in the same spot, was indeed seldom to be found in the same spot on two consecutive days; but always he was in the locality, for the most part as near to the fringe of the lake itself as possible, though often half hidden away in a coppice or in the lee of a fisherman's hut. Everyone knew that he had taken up a lodging with an elderly couple who lived in a respectable homestead three miles away from Schloss Allendorf,

and that he took all his meals alone, as he did not wish people to see him eat, owing to his maimed right hand, the hand in which one holds the knife.

Elmo, who had not felt himself responsible in any way for their quarrel, though in a manner understanding that it was unavoidable, was concerned as to how Viktor would fare during the coming autumn and winter, the accident having happened on a sultry night in August, and the Bodensee being often an inclement region during at least half the year. One of the doctors with whom Elmo spoke expressed the medical view that the entity which had inflicted the terrible injury had also infected the entire physiology of the victim with some bacillus, perhaps unknown, which had in a measure unbalanced his judgement. On the evidence, this seemed very likely.

As to the entity itself, opinions inevitably differed. Among the unsophisticated, reference was made to the monster known to have inhabited the deepest depths of the lake from earliest time, and to have been actually seen by Carolus Magnus, and both seen and interviewed by Paracelsus. The more general and representative view was that Viktor's injury had been done by a freshwater shark. It was just the sort of random tearing that a shark goes in for, said those who had met sharks in the East and places like that.

There would have been a far greater popular sensation had Viktor been a more popular and acceptable figure, or had he lived more according to his rank, instead of, like Elmo, as far as possible incognito. The nicer people even felt that Viktor would not *want* to be the centre of a major and long-enduring sensation. Even so, in many quarters at that part of the lakeside, the children were provided with a list of precise prohibitions. Perhaps in consequence, there seemed to occur no record of any child being attacked as Viktor had been attacked. Sooner than might have been expected, there was little trace of what had happened to Viktor, other than Viktor himself, who continued forlornly to haunt the shores of the lake, even, as Elmo had apprehended, on many days during the cold of winter.

Viktor's strange way of life inspired the great poetess who resided in one of the best situated of the lakeside castles to write a symbolic poem, though

not all who know and love the poem, are informed about how it came to be written, or would believe if told.

Elmo no longer felt the same about Schloss Allendorf, and went back to Berlin and his regiment almost with relief. But he then met Elvira at a place where the younger officers mingled with aspirant actresses, singers, and (especially) dancers, after the fall of the curtain.

Elvira was a dancer, though she danced less often and regularly after she passed within Elmo's protection. Beneath Elvira's spell, Elmo nearly forgot about Viktor and a dozen others. He was deeply in love with her, and seemingly more and more so as the years passed. He never doubted either that she felt the same about him or that it would go on for ever, even though in the nature of things he could never marry her. He was surrounded by such relationships, even among older people; and in some cases a relationship of the kind had seemed to endure, even though persons who knew nothing about it claimed in a general way that duration was always impossible. As for practicalities, Elmo, being one to whom only the ideal was entirely existent, sincerely believed it to suffice that he had money, where Elvira had little or none, and even less in the way of prospects. Moreover, Elvira was not a dancer in a Paris boîte, but in a minor opera house. There was an inspirational force within Elmo of which the sensitive soon became aware, and which had led to his *Spottname* or nickname. Even in a tight corner on a battlefield, he might conceivably have accomplished more than any of his robuster, better-trained relations, and sacrificed fewer lives.

However, when the setting was a tight corner by the large lake in the *Tiergarten*, all decision was virtually taken out of his hands, though not immediately. Elmo, who thought that by now he knew himself through and through, had never doubted his capacity to destroy himself on the instant in the terrible circumstances that had descended upon him at once so conclusively and so unexpectedly; nor did he lack the means.

Never for one instant, by day or by night, had he lacked the means, since, on his fourteenth birthday, his distant cousin, Sophie-Anna, had given him her own, small, delicately lacquered pistol, and bidden him always thereafter to have it with him. She was wearing a lilac dress with a pattern

of large, vague, white roses for the family celebration of which he was the centre. "A woman should always have money," she had said in her boudoir before they went down. "A man should always have—this." It was perhaps because of the circumstances in which he had received the pretty pistol that Elmo had never, as yet, once discharged it, though he took care that one of his men regularly maintained and oiled it; but he had been given plenty of practice at the range with weapons of a generally similar kind. Elmo knew how to shoot straight and on the instant and to kill.

But he found that it was difficult to kill himself in the almost total darkness. He was astonished that the effulgence of the city lights, albeit renowned, should make so little impression upon the heart of the *Tiergarten*. The trees must be far denser than he had ever supposed; and a lake does imply either a moon or a storm. Probably the truth was that Elmo had succumbed to the same near-paralysis of will and feeling as was at that moment depriving Elvira even of the purpose to keep herself warm, and which, with supposed mercifulness, always supervenes at the end of a great love before the months and years of loss and deprivation set in. Sometimes this almost total numbness lasts for as long as 48 hours. But for Elmo it was the darkness that seemed to be the trouble. It was like trying to act decisively in limbo.

Then Elmo actually began to shiver. Partly, he realized, it was the first of the dawn at which hour so many pass that even the insensitive, if in an open space at the centre of a large city, are aware of their passing.

There was a strange, faint, even light descended upon the water, acceptable, perhaps, as the last of evening, but infinitely perturbing as the first of day. All with hearts must shiver to see it and close their minds to thought.

But there was a figure in the lake, or above it: if in it, then not of it. It was a beautiful woman; it was a woman more beautiful than any man could have conceived or imagined as possible. She was white and naked, and she had large eyes, like the eyes of the Blessed Virgin, and a wide red mouth, which smiled.

Elmo knew at once that he had fallen asleep from cold and wretchedness and that this was a dream, devised for his further torment. Because all that the vision had done was to reinstate the thought and recollection of Elvira in

full brutality; unbearably to invigorate sentiments lately numbed into brief abeyance. "Curse you, curse you," groaned Elmo; and, as he cursed, the little pistol in his hand was discharged by him for the first time. It was unfortunate, too, that, dream or no dream, his hand was still shaking as much as if he were fully awake at that hour; indeed his entire arm. The vision had faded or vanished anyway, and it was hard to say where the bullet had lodged. There were still occasional duels in the *Tiergarten*, and small holes were sometimes found in trees. As for the vision, it had probably lingered for less than a second, much as if it had been an apparition of the Virgin indeed. And the pistol was of the lady's kind that contains only one bullet.

Elmo recalled a simple truth that had, as it happened, been uttered in his case, by the mistress of the ballet at Elvira's minor opera house, the lady who saw to it that the girls were properly dressed and equipped, punctual, and diligent, though naturally she did not herself devise any of the works in which they danced: "We do not die merely because we want to," this woman had said in Elmo's hearing. In the faint and frightening light of a new dawn, the big trees stood around watching his every gesture, absorbing his every breath. No other mode of death was possible for a soldier and a prince. With another curse, Elmo threw the pistol into the lake.

Even in this respect, what happened seemed mysteriously significant. That same day the pistol was seen gleaming upwards through the water by a park attendant. He recovered it with the long rake provided for such incidents, and, because the pistol bore on its butt the name of the Countess Sophie-Anna, it was respectfully returned to her by the superintendent, whose staff spent much time in wrapping it with sufficient care for the post. This time the Countess retained it. She merely sent Elmo a short letter. Elmo had, in fact, lost his chance with the Countess, who from now on regarded him with indifference. But the Countess addressed her little letter to the family residence in the capital (she was fully in Elmo's confidence about Elvira); with the result that Elmo never received it, as he had left Berlin by an evening train on the day of his disintegration in the *Tiergarten*.

Elmo realized that he was dead anyway. Elvira had killed him, life had killed him, the passing years had killed him: whichever it was. There was

no need for a weapon, or for action of any kind on his part. When the heart is dead, all is dead, though the victim may not fully realize it for a long time. Elmo had realized when he had thrown away the pistol; and the Countess's action in contemptuously depriving him of any second chance was superfluous.

Elmo went to the Bodensee, because there seemed to be nowhere else where he could so easily be alone, indeed settle himself in a solitude. Before leaving Berlin, he had telegraphed the major-domo (in truth only a senior peasant, elevated, at the most, to caretaker) to arrange for the carriage to meet him at Stuttgart. He reached that other Schloss Allendorf by ten o'clock the next morning, feeling very hungry. Both with sleep and with appetite, unhappiness sometimes augments and sometimes destroys. It was eight years since he had been there.

For a year, he confined himself to the semi-ruinous buildings and to the neglected park stretching vaguely away behind them. He never once went down to the lake, lest he be observed. The park was at least walled, and it would have been a serious matter with the Hereditary Prince if the wall had been permitted to crumble at any point. Elmo never allowed as much as the light of a candle in any of his rooms unless the shutters had first been closed and the long, dusty curtains drawn tight. He gave orders that his arrival was to be mentioned nowhere, and that all letters (if there were to be any) were to be cast away unopened.

He read Thomas à Kempis and Jakob Böhme in copies from the castle library; of which the pages were spotted and flaky, and from which the leathery covers parted in his hands, revealing pallid, wormy activities within. Every now and then he inscribed thoughts of his own on the blank pages of an old folio. It was a book on magic. There were printed words and diagrams only in the first half of the volume. The remaining pages had been left blank for the purchaser or inheritor to add reports of his or her own, but no one seemed so far to have done so. Elmo found, as have many, that the death of the heart corrupted the pen into writing a farrago of horrors and insanities, not necessarily the less true for their seeming extravagance, but inaccessible for the most part to the prudent. Thus another autumn followed another summer, and then another cold, damp winter drew near.

Elmo discovered that even the imminence of spring, the worst quarter of the year for the sensitive, the period of most suicides, the season of greatest sadness, no longer disturbed him, or not that he was aware of. Before leaving, he had told them in Berlin that he was not to be approached: nor were such orders altogether unusual on the part of those in a position to give them. Autumn offered a faint respite.

Not that Elmo abstained from looking out over the lake from various upstairs windows. It seemed perfectly secure, provided that he took care to stand well back in the room; which was often, at that, an empty room as far as furniture or pictures or trophies were concerned. The panes in the windows were old and imperfect, not only defeating the intrusive stare from without, but also adding much to the fascination of the view across the water from within. Moreover, these upstairs windows were very imperfectly and infrequently cleaned. Sometimes Elmo would stand gazing and lost for hours at a time, oblivious at least; but in the end cramp and weariness would suddenly overcome him, in that it was, of course, impermissible to lean against the window frames themselves, as do most who look forth on life outside their abode.

"Jurgen!" Elmo went to the door of the big, empty room and shouted. He had expropriated all calendars, but supposed it to be now the end of September or the beginning of October: a phase of the twelvemonth when cold became noticeable. It was about eleven o'clock in the morning.

Jurgen, one of the resident peasants, came clambering up the several flights of imposing but uncarpeted stairs. Elmo had attached this man to his more personal needs, in the absence of the valet who had been his go-between or Mercury with Elvira, and who had therefore been left behind to rediscover himself in Berlin. The man was in late middle-age (or more), but had seemed sharper than his fellows.

"Jurgen. You see that boat?"

Jurgen looked through the discoloured window rather casually. "No, your Highness. I see no boat."

"Look again, man. Look harder. Look."

"Well, perhaps, your Highness."

"There's something I recognize about it. Something familiar."

Jurgen stared at his master, though only from the corner of his eye. He was not sure that he himself could see anything at all. However, his master's statement was all of a piece.

"Have you any ideas about it, Jurgen?"

"No, your Highness."

"I need to know. I should like the boat to be brought in, if necessary."

"That's not possible, your Highness."

"Why not? We've got Delphin and Haifisch, and men to row them. Or to sail them, if the wind's right."

"It's not that, your Highness."

"What is it, then?"

"If the boat your Highness speaks of out there is the boat I think I can see—though I'm not really sure about it, your Highness—she's not in territorial water."

"Not in our territorial water maybe, but I don't think we shall start a war."

Elmo, however, reflected for a moment. The Lake of Constance was adjoined by several different national territories, with varying statutes and rights. What did it really matter about the boat? What did it really matter about anything? What other thought mattered than that nothing mattered?

He was about to resign the pointless idea, as he had resigned other ideas, when Jurgen spoke again. "Your Highness, if the boat your Highness speaks of is where she seems to be, then, your Highness, she is on No Man's Water."

"What's that, Jurgen?"

"No Man's Water, your Highness, " Jurgen said again.

"I don't know what you mean, Jurgen."

Jurgen looked as if taken aback; so much so that he seemed unable to speak.

"You've lived here all your life," said Elmo, "and your father before you, and so forth. I haven't. In any case, I never came here for history and geography lessons. Explain what you mean."

"Well, your Highness, everyone knows—I beg your Highness's pardon—that there's a part of the lake which belongs to no one, no king or emperor, and not to Switzerland either, and from what I can see of it, if I can see it at all, that boat out there is on that very piece of water."

"I don't believe there's any such spot, Jurgen. I'm sure you think it, but it's impossible."

"As your Highness says," replied Jurgen.

Elmo was again looking out. "Can't you see something familiar about that boat?" It was true that, like most members of his family, he had exceptionally long sight, but he was staring as if distracted. He had even drawn far too near to the glass, though fortunately there seemed none to see him, as he would have been visible only from the lake; and on the lake, that cold morning, there was only the single boat in question, very distant, if there at all. Often there were odd fishermen, and odd traders too, but at the moment none were in sight.

"What is familiar about it, if I may venture to ask your Highness?"

"I wish I knew," said Elmo slowly. "I simply don't know. And yet I know I do."

"Yes, your Highness," replied Jurgen.

His master's words were still all of a piece. Downstairs most had come to the view that their master was simply a little out of his mind, poor gentleman. It was common enough among the great families; and elsewhere for that matter. He was always identifying things and recollecting things and staring at things.

"How are you so sure where this piece of water is?" asked Elmo, not looking at Jurgen, but still staring. "How can you tell?"

"All of us know, your Highness. We know all our lives. Near enough leastways, your Highness. So that we don't find ourselves there by mistake like. "

"Would it matter so much if you did?"

"Oh yes, your Highness. As I said to your Highness, it's a piece of water that belongs to no one. That's not natural, is it, your Highness?"

"If this had been a year ago," said Elmo, "I should first have had the whole story properly looked into, and then, if there had proved to be anything true about it, I should have sailed out there myself."

Jurgen was obviously about to demur, and there was a slight but detectable passage of time before he replied, "As your Highness says."

"But I don't believe a word of it," commented Elmo petulantly. It was difficult to decide to what extent he was still staring out at the lake and to what extent he was staring at the blackness inside him.

Jurgen bowed more formally and clattered downstairs again.

The survival of the lost beloved being so incomparably more afflicting than his or her death, the bereaved is the more likely to vary bitter grief with occasional episodes of hysterical elation, as the dying man, isolated amid the Polar or Himalayan snows, has quarter hours of almost peaceful confidence that of course he will emerge, even believing that he sees how.

So it was that afternoon with Elmo. He found himself growing more and more wildly excited by what Jurgen had asserted, nonsense though it was. The world seemed to be suddenly lighted up with liberation, as in that case of the Polar or Himalayan castaway. Inwardly he knew that any motion on his part, however minute or merely symbolic, would at once dim and then rapidly extinguish the light: he must simply hold on to the excitement as long as he could, for its own sake. Indeed, he had been through such interludes before during the past year, through two or three of them; and he knew how transitory they were. All the same, if the castle library had offered a modern reference book, he might have consulted it. As it was, it contained nothing of the kind later than works left behind (or "presented") by the French officers at the time of the Napoleonic occupation.

When one is dead as Elmo was dead, ideas cease to be big or small, true or false, weighty or trivial: the only distinction is between irritant and anodyne. Long after his false elation had worn off (such conditions seldom last as long as an hour), Jurgen's fantasy still lingered in Elmo's mind as anodyne.

Shortly after three o'clock that afternoon, he picked up the bell and shook it. The wiring of the castle bells had become so defective that Elmo found he did better with a handbell, but it had to be a big, heavy, and noisy one, a veritable crier's bell, or it would not have been heard through the thick walls, and down the corridors.

"Jurgen. I should like to see Herr Spalt. After dinner, of course."

"But, your Highness—" After all, Jurgen's master had not merely seen no one from the outside world for a twelvemonth, but had given particular directions, with serious penalties attached, that no one was even to be told he was in residence.

"After dinner, Jurgen, I should like to see Herr Spalt."

"I shall see what can be done, your Highness. I shall do my best."

"No man can do more," commented Elmo with a spectral smile.

Herr Spalt was the schoolmaster. In other days, Elmo had not infrequently asked him in, to share some evening concoction he, Elmo, had himself prepared according to regimental tradition. Indeed, Elmo considered that he had learned much from Spalt, whom he deemed to be palpably no ordinary village disciplinarian. He assumed that, at some point in his career or in his life, Spalt had been in trouble, so that he had sunk below his proper position in scholarship.

As has been said, the grief-stricken sometimes gorge and sometimes starve. That evening Elmo ate little. Some new impulse had entered his bloodstream, though he could not decide whether it helped or harmed, especially as there was so little difference between the two.

It was past eight o'clock when Spalt arrived. The walk from the village was not inconsiderable, notably in the dark. Spalt now was a corpulent man, grey-skinned and bald, and with an overall air of neglect. There was even a triangular tear in the left leg of his trousers. He was noticeably what is described as "a confirmed bachelor".

"Spalt, have some Schnapps." Elmo poured two large measures. "It's cold in the evenings. It's cold always."

Spalt made a fat little bow.

Elmo said: "I do not wish to go into things. There are reasons for all I do and all I do not."

Spalt bowed again, sucking at the Schnapps. "Your Highness's confidences are his own."

"Tell me how is Baron Viktor von Revenstein?"

"As before, your Highness. There is no change that we are aware of."

"What did *you* make of it, Spalt?"

"The baron endured a terrible experience, your Highness. Terrible." Spalt's expression had seldom been seen to change. Possibly this was a

qualification for his profession. The young have to be strengthened, especially the young men and boys.

"If I remember rightly, you were among those who thought it was done by a shark?"

"Something like that, your Highness. What else could it have been?"

"A freshwater shark?"

Spalt said nothing.

"Are there such things? You are a well-informed man, Spalt. I have found that you know almost everything. Are there such things as freshwater sharks? Do they exist?"

"The ichthyologists do not know of them, your Highness. That is true. But there must have been something of the kind out there. If not exactly a shark, then something not dissimilar. What other explanation is possible?"

Elmo refilled the glasses, lavishly.

"Jurgen, my man here, rough, very rough, but not a conscious liar I should say, has been telling me a wild tale about there being a part of the lake which belongs to no one. To no state or ruler; to no one of any kind, as I gather. Have you ever heard of that?"

"Oh yes, your Highness," replied Spalt. "It is perfectly true."

"Really? You astonish me. How can it be possible?"

"There was not always an international law governing the ownership of open water between different states, and even now that law is very imperfect. It is distinctly controversial in various parts of the world. In our case, the international law has never been deemed to apply. The ownership of the lake's surface has been governed by treaty and even by convention. One consequence, doubtless unintended, is that part of the lake's surface belongs to no one. It is quite simple."

"What about beneath the water?"

The same, your Highness, I imagine. Exactly the same."

"The lake is very deep, I have always understood?"

"In places, your Highness. Very deep indeed in places. There has never been a complete hydrographical survey."

"Indeed! Do you not think there should be?"

"It is hard to see what practical purpose could be served."

"The acquisition of new knowledge is surely a sufficient end in itself?"

"So it is said, your Highness."

"But you must agree? You are our local savant."

Instead of replying, Spalt said: "Your Highness was not then aware that the baron's terrible injury happened on that part of the lake?"

"Of course I was not. Though perhaps since this afternoon I may have suspected it. Perhaps that is why you are here now. But how do you know, in any case? You were not there."

"I was not there. And indeed I do not know in the ordinary sense. No one knows in that sense, except perhaps your Highness, who was there. None the less, I am sure of it."

"Why are you sure of it?"

"Because it is the part of the lake where all strange things happen."

"What else has happened there?"

"Fishermen have seen treasure ships there. Sailors in the service once fought a big battle there—suffered deaths and casualties too. Men whose

lives were due to end have crossed the lake on calm nights and perished there, or at least vanished there."

"Anything else, Spalt?"

"Yes, your Highness. A boy I was fond of, already a brilliant scholar, saw a phantom there, and is now screaming in the Margrave's madhouse."

"How often do you suggest that these things happen?"

"Rarely, your Highness. Or so I suppose. But when they do happen it is always in that region of the water. However infrequently it be. I have sometimes thought there have been unacknowledged reasons why that part of the lake has been left unpossessed."

"Yes," said Elmo. "I'm not sure I don't accept every word you say."

"There is believed to be a certain truth among us peasants," said Spalt quietly, and pulling heavily on the long glass of spirits, which, indeed, he emptied.

"I don't see you as a peasant, Spalt, splendid fellows though most of them are."

"None the less, I am a peasant, your Highness."

"Be that as it may," said Elmo, "you are a very deep man. I've always known that."

"There is hardly a man on the lakeside who cannot tell a story about No Man's Water, your Highness, often many stories."

"In that case, why have I never heard of this before?"

"It is *unheimlich*, your Highness. Men do not speak of it. It is like the secrets of the heart, the true secrets which one man only knows."

"An exalted comparison, Spalt."

"We are most of us two people, your Highness. There is something lacking in the man who is one man only, and so, as he believes, at peace with the world and with himself."

"Is there, Spalt?"

"And the two people within us seldom communicate. Even when both are present together in consciousness, there is little communication. Neither can confront the other without discomfort."

"One of the two sometimes dies before the other," observed Elmo.

"Life is primarily directed to seeing that that happens, your Highness. Life, as we know it, could hardly continue if men did not soon slay the dreamer inside them. There are the children to think of; the mothers who breed them and thus enable our race to endure; the economy; the ordered life of society. Of such factors as these your Highness will be always particularly aware, in view of your Highness's station and responsibilities."

"Yes," said Elmo. "As you say, it is my duty, which, naturally, we all perform as best we can." He came over with the bottle. "Fill up, Spalt. Let me rekindle the dying fire." But Elmo's hand was shaking as he poured, so that he splashed the drink on the table, already in need of a finer polish; and even on the schoolmaster's worn trousers, though Spalt remained motionless.

"Men's dreams, their inner truth, are *unhelmlich* also, your Highness. If any man examines his inner truth with both eyes wide open, and his inner eye wide open also, he will be overcome with terror at what he finds. That, I have always supposed, is why we hear these stories about a region of our lake. Out there, on the water, in darkness, out of sight, men encounter the image within them. Or so they suppose. It is not to be expected that many will return unscathed."

"Thus with men, Spalt. What about women?"

"Women have no inner life that is so decisively apart. With women the inner life merges ever with the totality. That is why women seem to men

either deceitful and elusive, or moralistic and uninteresting. Women have no problem comparable with the problem of merely being a man. They do not need our lake."

"Have you ever been married, Spalt? I imagine not at all."

"Certainly, I have been married, your Highness. As I reminded your Highness, I am but a peasant."

"And what happened?"

"She died in childbirth. Our first-born."

"I am sorry, Spalt."

"No doubt it also saved much sadness for both of us. There is always that to remember."

"Did the child die too?"

"No, your Highness. She did not. The father had no inclination to remarry; and a woman to look after the child—the little girl—would have led at once to malice when the father was a schoolmaster, and required to be an example. I was fortunate in being able to leave the child in a good home. As schoolmaster, I was of course informed about all the homes. She is now in your Highness's employ, but she has no idea that I am her father, and would suffer much if she knew, so that I request your Highness to be silent, if the occasion ever occurs."

"Of course, of course, Spalt. I grieve for you that things did not work out better."

"All things must go ill one day, your Highness, or what seems to be ill. That is the message of the *memento mori*. And usually it is one day soon." His long glass was empty again, and he was gazing with apparent absorption at the patches of discoloration on the backs of his hands.

The Bodensee is not precisely a mountain lake. Only at the eastern end, in the territory of the Austrian Empire, above and around Bregenz, are the

mountains immediate. Elsewhere they are but background, sometimes distant; occasionally fanciful, as behind Bodman, where the primitives live; often invisible through the transforming atmosphere. None the less, around the wider perimeter the mountains wait and watch, as do the immense, unknowable entities that on and within them dwell. When the moon is clouded or withdrawn, there are those areas where the lake seems as large as the sea, as black, as treacherous, as omnipotent; and no one can tell how cold who has not been afloat there in a small boat alone.

So it was now with Elmo. There was no gleam or spark of light anywhere, but there was a faint swell on the surface of the water, and every now and then the clink of ice against the boat, though one might not have supposed the season for ice quite arrived. Never before in his life had he experienced such total darkness. Never in his childhood had he been locked in a dark cellar or cupboard, and never in manhood had he known serious action in the field. Somewhere between the rickety but, as he embarked, reasonably visible castle jetty, with its prohibitory notices, and the part of the lake where he now was, he had realized that the fabric of the boat had suffered from neglect; but he could not see the water that had seeped in, or for that matter yet hear it swill. It was merely that he could feel dampness, and a little more than dampness, when, having paused in his progress, he had placed his hand on the floor planks; which he had been led to do by the almost uncanny coldness of his ten toes.

Still it was no matter to go back for. Life's challenge (or menace) can, after all, never be evaded; and Elmo realized that, within his world of pain, he was fortunate that to him the contest presented itself in a shape so clear-cut, so four-square, defined with such comparative precision by a schoolmaster. Whatever else might happen (if anything did), the little boat would not sink yet awhile.

Indeed, it was perhaps not such a little boat at that: Elmo was finding it heavier and heavier to pull with every minute that passed, or was it with every hour? The darkness was so thick that it impeded his movements like frozen black treacle. The darkness also smelt. Whoever can tell what lies beneath deep waters after all the centuries and millennia; especially under such unmastered and comparatively remote waters as Elmo now traversed?

Soon it seemed as if not merely the darkness but the lake itself were holding him back. It was almost as if he were sweating to pull or push the vessel through frozen mud; through a waste such as only the earliest seekers for the North West Passage had had to include among their trials. For all his exertion, Elmo could feel the ice quickly forming not merely on his face, but all over his body. Soon he might be encased, and doubtless the ill-maintained boat also.

The boat was lower in the water. Elmo realized this as he tried to pull. And it was no matter of a possible leak in the hull. There was no more water in the bottom of the boat than formerly. It was still possible for Elmo to check that; which he did with his cold right hand. For the purpose he had to leave hold of the oar or scull; but the boat was so far down that somehow the oar left its rowlock, thereby left the boat also, and vanished into the darkness with an odd crash. Elmo in horror clutched at the other oar with both hands at once; but this action merely swung the boat's course many points to port, and the other oar vanished likewise as she twisted through the mysteriously resistant water. Elmo's hands were too frozen to hold on to the unwieldy object under such conditions.

Elmo realized that something had hold of the bottom of the boat. He could feel the straining of her timbers, robust enough looking on shore, but out here truly matchwood or less. Indeed, the drag and stress on the boat's planks was by now the only thing he could feel, and he felt it through all his muscles. Nor was there a thing to be seen; though the confused odours were being subtly alembicated into one single sweet perfume. The crackling of the ice against the boat seemed to Elmo to be rising to a roar, although, surely, it was yet but autumn.

It was not, he thought, the same lady that he had seen, however momentarily, however dreamily, above the lake in the *Tiergarten*. But she was visible all the same; and Elmo at once apprehended how and why. It must indeed be that many hours had passed, though previously he had not really thought so; because here, once more, was the first, faint, frightening light of dawn. This lady, too, had large eyes and a large mouth; but now the mouth was open, showing white and pointed teeth, as many teeth as a strange fish. Although her mouth was so very open, this lady smiled not.

And, of course, as in the earlier instance, she was gone almost as soon as come; but, also as in the earlier instance, she brought back to the eyes of the heart the vision of Elvira, dread and lethal and indestructible.

Elmo laid himself down in the boat. He was an ice-man. "Receive one who is dead already," he half whispered to the spirits of the lake and mountains.

The light was more yellow than grey; the surface ice by no means so dense, or even so serrated as Elmo supposed. It is to be repeated it was no later than autumn.

The few remains were far beyond identification. The body had been gnashed and gnawed and ripped, so that even the bones were mostly sliced away and splintered. And, of course, there was no proper head. All had in truth to be guesswork. "There's nothing in that coffin," men mouthed to each other when, in a few days' time, the hour came for the noble ceremony. Moreover, from first finding to last disposing, throughout it was freezing winter, authentically and accurately.

And what happened to Viktor, some have wondered? From the time of Elmo's presumed death, he seemed steadily to recapture his wits, until when the world war struck, a generation and a half later, he was deemed fit once more for service of a land, and, though stationed far behind the lines, had the misfortune to be annihilated, with all who were with him, in consequence of a freakish hit by the British artillery; a lucky shot, the British might have called it. Thus Viktor's death too was not without distinction.

Marriage (1977)

Helen Black and Ellen Brown: just a simple coincidence, and representative of the very best that life offers most of us by way of comedy and diversion. A dozen harmless accidents of that kind and one could spend a year of one's life laughing and wondering, and ever and anon recur to the topic in the years still to come.

Laming Gatestead met Helen Black in the gallery of the theater. The only thing that mattered much about the play or the production was that Yvonne Arnaud was in it, which resulted in Helen adoring the play, whereas Laming merely liked it. However, the topic gave them something to talk about. This was welcome, because it was only in the second intermission that Laming had plucked up courage (or whatever the relevant quality was) to speak at all.

Helen was a slightly austere-looking girl, with a marked bone structure and pale eyes. Her pale hair was entirely off the face, so that her equally pale ears were conspicuous. She might not have been what Laming would have selected had he been a playboy in Brussels or a casting director with the. latest "Spotlight" on his knees; but, in present circumstances, the decisive elements were that Helen was all by herself and still quite young, whereas he was backward, blemished, and impecunious. Helen wore a delightfully simple black dress, very neatly kept. When they rose at the end of the applause, to which Laming had contributed with pleasing vigor, Helen proved to be considerably the taller.

Secretly, Laming was very surprised when she agreed to come with him for coffee and even more surprised when, after a second cup, she accepted his invitation to another gallery, this time with Marie Tempest as the attraction. A night was firmly settled upon for the following week. They were to find one another inside. Helen had appreciated how little money Laming might have, and being entertained to coffee was quite enough at that stage of their acquaintanceship.

He took her hand, only to shake it, of course, but even that was something. It was, however, a dry, bony hand, more neutral, he felt, than his own.

"Oh," he said, as if he had been speaking quite casually. "I don't know your name."

"Helen Black."

"Perhaps I'd better have your address? I might get a sore throat."

"42 Washwood Court, N.W.6."

Of course his Chessman's Diary for that year had been carefully though unobtrusively at the ready: an annual gift from his Aunty Antoinette.

"I'm Laming Gatestead."

"Like the place in the North?"

"Not Gateshead. Gatestead."

"So sorry." Her eyes seemed to warm a little in the ill-lit back street, on to which the gallery exit romantically debouched.

"Everyone gets it wrong."

"And what an unusual Christian name!"

"My father was keen on Sir Laming Worthington-Evans. He used to be secretary of state for war. He's dead now."

"Which of them is?"

"Both are, I'm afraid."

"I *am* sorry. Was your father a soldier?"

"No, he just liked to follow political form, as he called it."

They parted without Laming's address in Drayton Park having had to be prematurely divulged.

After that, they saw Leslie Banks and Edith Evans in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and before they had even stirred their coffee, Helen said, "My roommate and I would like you to come to supper one of these evenings. Not before eight o'clock, please, and don't expect too much."

Roommates were not always joined in such invitations, but Laming realized that, after all, Helen knew virtually nothing about him and might well have been advised not necessarily to believe a word men actually said.

"My roommate will be doing most of the cooking," said Helen.

Ah!

"What's her name?"

"Ellen Brown."

"What an extraordinary coincidence!"

"Isn't it? How about next Wednesday? Ellen comes home early on Wednesdays and will have more time."

"What does Ellen do?"

"She advises on baby clothes."

"Not exactly my world. Well, not yet."

"Ellen's very nice," said Helen firmly.

Helen's face offered much expression, Laming reflected. Within her own limits, she seemed to do perfectly well without it.

And, indeed, Ellen was nice. In fact, she was just, about the nicest girl that Laming had ever encountered (if that was the word). Her handshake was soft, lingering, and very slightly moist, and the deep V of her striped jumper

implied a trustfulness that went straight to Laming's heart. She had large brown eyes, a gentle nose, and thick, short hair, very dark, into which one longed to plunge first one's fingers and then one's mouth. Laming found himself offering her the box of White Magic peppermint creams he had brought with him, before realizing that of course he should have proffered it first to Helen.

In fact, Ellen, herself so like a soft round peppermint cream, immediately passed the unopened box to Helen, which hardly made an ideal start to what was bound to be a tricky evening.

Ellen looked much younger than Helen. Fifteen years? Laming wondered. But he was no good at such assessments and had several times in his life made slightly embarrassing errors.

"I'm quite ready when you both are," said Ellen, as if Helen had contributed nothing to the repast. There was no smell of cooking and no sign of a teacloth. Everything was calm and controlled.

"Laming would like a glass of sherry first," said Helen. She wore a simple dark-blue dress.

Again Laming had difficulty in not raising his glass primarily to Ellen.

There was a little soup and then a cutlet each, with a few runner beans and pommes a la Suisse.

Helen sat at the head of the small rectangular table, with Laming on her left and Ellen on her right.

Laming was unable to meet Ellen's lustrous eyes for more than a second at a time, but there was no particular difficulty in gazing for longer periods at the glimpses of Ellen's slip, peony in color. Ellen's hand movements were beautiful too.

Helen was talking about how much she adored Leslie Banks. She would go absolutely anywhere to see him, do absolutely anything. She said such things without a trace of gush or even any particular animation. It was

possibly a manner she had acquired in the civil service. (She was concerned in some way with poultry statistics.)

"I often *dream* of that mark on his face," said Helen calmly.

"Is it a birthmark?" asked Ellen. Her very voice was like sweet chestnut puree at Christmas and, in the same way, offered only sparingly. She had said only five things since Laming had been in the room. Laming knew because he had counted them. He also remembered them, word perfect.

"I think it's a war wound," said Laming, speaking toward his cutlet.

"Ellen wouldn't know," said Helen. "She doesn't follow the stage very much. We *must* go and see Raymond Massey some time, Laming. I adore him too, though not as much as Leslie Banks."

"Raymond Massey is a Canadian," offered Laming.

"But with hardly a trace of an accent."

"I once saw Fred Terry when I was a kid," said Laming. *"In Sweet Nell of Old Drury."*

"I was brought up in Sidmouth, and Ellen in Church Win-shun," said Helen.

"Only North London," said Laming, with exaggerated modesty. "But I saw Fred Terry and Julia Neilson at the King's Hammersmith when visiting my aunty."

"I simply long to go to Stratford-on-Avon," said Helen. "I believe Fabia Drake's doing frightfully well there."

"Yes, it would be lovely," said Laming.

"I adore opera too. I long to go to Bayreuth."

Laming was too unsure of the details to make an effective reply to that; so he concentrated on paring away the hard narrow strip from the upward edge of his cutlet.

Later there were orange segments and cream; while Helen spoke of life in South Devon, where she had lived as a child and Laming had twice been on farmhouse holidays.

Ellen brought them coffee, while they sat on the settee. Her eyes were reflected in the fluid. No odalisque could have made slighter movements to more effect.

The peppermint creams came partially into their own.

"I don't eat many sweet things," said Helen. "You must remember, Laming?"

The worst part was that now he did remember. She had submitted quite a list of such items in the cafe after Marie Tempest. What she liked most was chicken perfectly plain. What she liked least was anything rich. What a crashing mistake he had made in the selection of his gift! But what else would have been practicable?

Ellen, however, was making up for her roommate. She was eating cream after cream, and without even asking before taking another, which made it all the more intimate.

"I long to visit Japan and see the Noh." said Helen.

Laming did not know about that at all and could only suppose it was a relative of the mikado, about whom there was something unusual. Or perhaps it was a huge stone thing, like the Sphinx.

"When I get my certificate, I'm going on a real bust," said Laming, then blushed at the word. "*If* I get my certificate, that is."

"Surely you will, Laming?"

"No one can ever be quite sure."

Ellen was twisting about in the armchair, arranging herself better.

Laming told a rather detailed story about the older colleague in the firm who had left no stone unturned but still lacked a certificate. "It's held up his marriage for more than eight years. He was there long before I was."

"I'm sure that won't happen to you, Laming. Shall we ask Ellen to give us some more coffee? Don't you adore coffee? I drink it all night to keep me awake."

Laming assumed that it was her statistics. Increasingly, civil servants were having to take work home, as if they had been in real business. Laming had read about it in the evening paper, more than once, in fact.

"Not too full, Ellen! I shall slop it over myself."

"Would you like to see my old programs, Laming? Ellen won't mind, I'm sure."

But Laming had managed to glimpse a meaning look in Ellen's soft features. It contrasted noticeably with Helen's habitual inexpressiveness.

"*I* should like it, but I think we should do something that Ellen can join in."

He was quite surprised at himself and did not dare to look at Helen that time.

"Shall we play three-handed Rocket?"

"I'm afraid I don't know the rules."

"I'm nothing like clever enough for them," said Ellen, her sixth or seventh remark.

Laming had ceased to count. He knew he could not carry any more remarks faithfully enough in his mind.

"Well, then, we'll just talk," said Helen. "What aie we going to do next, Laming?"

"There's that thing at the Apollo."

"Yes, I long to see that."

"I can't remember a single thing that's been said about it."

"We mustn't always allow our minds to be made up for us."

They had all become quite chummy, Laming realized; nor could it be the passing effect of alcohol. At that moment he felt that he had been really accepted into the household. Instinctively, his manners fell to pieces a little.

At the end of the evening, Helen said, "You must come again often. We like having company, don't we, Ellen?"

Ellen simply nodded, but with her lovely, almost elfin, smile. She was fiddling with the bottom edge of her jumper, using both hands. The narrow horizontal stripes were in a sort of gray, a sort of blue, a sort of pink. Her skirt was fawn.

"I should very much like to, Helen," replied Laming, in a public-school manner, though the place he had been to was pretty near the bottom of any realistic list.

"Well, do. Now, Laming, we meet a week from today at the Apollo."

She imparted her dry grip. Laming could not but remember that only three or four weeks ago it had all but thrilled him. When in bed, he must look at his Chessman's Diary to see *exactly* how long ago it had been.

Ellen merely stood smiling, but with her hands locked together behind her skirt, a posture that moved Laming considerably.

On the way home, however, he was wrestling with a problem more familiar: the problem of how to attempt reciprocation in these cases, when one could not at all afford it; these cases in which hospitality could hardly be rejected if one were to remain a social being at all. The complaint against life might be that even if one expended one's every mite, which would be both unwise and impracticable, the social level accomplished did not really justify the

sacrifice. Most urgently one needed to start at a higher level: ab initio, ah ovo. And, if one hadn't, what really was the use?

But after business came pleasure, and Laming, awake in bed, spent a long, long time musing on Ellen, and twisting about restlessly. It was gray dawn before, in a sudden panic, he fell asleep.

In fact, *was* thinking about Ellen a pleasure? Apart from the inner turmoil caused by her very existence, there was the certainty that she was quite other than she seemed, and the extreme uncertainty about what to do next in order to advance with her.

When his mother brought him his cup of tea, he looked at her with sad eyes, then quickly turned away, lest she notice.

However, for the first time in Laming's life, something extraordinary happened, something that a third party might have marveled at for months and drawn new hope from.

Only two days later a crisis had arisen in the office: one of the partners required a parcel to be delivered at an address "down Fulham way," as the partner put it; and Laming had been the first to volunteer for the job-or perhaps, as he subsequently reflected, the junior who could best be spared.

"You can take a No. 14 most of the distance," the partner had said. "If you get stuck, ask someone. But do take care, old chap. That thing's fragile." Whereupon he had guffawed and returned to his den.

Laming had clambered off the bus at more or less the spot the partner had indicated and had looked around for someone to guide him further. At such times, so few people look as if they could possibly know; so few are people one could care or dare to address at all. In the end, and without having to put down the heavy parcel, Laming had obtained directions from a middle-aged district nurse, though she had proved considerably less informed than Laming had taken for granted. In no time at all, Laming had been virtually lost, and the parcel twice or thrice its former weight.

And now he had come to a small park or municipal garden, with mongrels running about the kids in one corner, breaking things up. He was very nearly in tears. At the outset, it had seemed likely that offering to perform a small service would stand well for him in his career, but that notion had gone into reverse and japed at him within five minutes of his starting to wait for the bus. He could hardly carry the parcel much farther. Ought he to spend money of his own on a taxi? If one were to appear?

And then he saw Ellen. The road was on his left, the dark-green park railings were on his right, and there were very few people on the pavement. Ellen was walking toward him. He nearly fainted, but responsibility for the parcel somehow saved him.

"Hullo, Laming!"

It was as if they were the most tender and long-standing of friends, for whom all formality was quite unnecessary.

"Hullo, Ellen!"

He too spoke very low, though really they were almost alone in the world.

"Come and sit down."

He followed her along the length of railing and through the gate. In a sense, it was quite a distance, but she said nothing more. He had heard that, in circumstances such as these, burdens became instantly and enduringly lighter, but he was not finding that with the parcel.

She was wearing a sweater divided into diamonds of different colors, but with nothing garish about it; and the same fawn skirt.

Once or twice she looked back with an encouraging smile. Laming almost melted away, but again the parcel helped to stabilize him.

He had naturally supposed that they would sit on a seat There were many seats, made years ago of wooden beams set in green cast iron frames, some almost perpendicular, some sloping lasciviously backward. Many had been

smashed up by children, and none at that moment seemed in any way occupied.

But Ellen sat down at the foot of a low grassy bank, even though there was an empty seat standing almost intact at the top of the rise. Laming, after a moment for surprise and hesitation, quite naturally sat down beside her. It was early May and the grass seemed dry enough, though the sky was overcast and depressing. He deposited the parcel as carefully as he could. It was a duty to keep close to it.

"I want you," said Ellen. "Please take me." She lifted his left hand and laid it on her right thigh, but under her skirt. He felt her rayon panties. It was the most wonderful moment in his life.

He knew perfectly well also that with the right person such things as this normally do not happen, but only infrequently with the wrong person.

He twisted around and, inserting his right hand under her jumper until it reached up to her sweetly silken breast, kissed her with passion. He had never kissed anyone with passion before.

"Please take me," said Ellen again.

One trouble was of course that he never had, and scarcely knew how. Chaff from the chaps really tells one very little. Another trouble was "lack of privacy," as he had heard it termed. He doubted very much whether most people-even most men-started in such an environment, whatever they might do later.

He glanced around as best he could. It was true that the park, quite small though it was, now seemed also quite empty. The children must be wrecking pastures new. And the visibility was low and typical.

"Not the light for cricket," said Laming. As a matter of fact, there were whitish things at the other end, which he took to be sight screens.

"Please," said Ellen, in her low, urgent voice. Her entire conversational method showed how futile most words really are. She began to range

around him with her hand.

"But what about-?"

"It's *all* right. Please."

Still, it really was the sticking point, the pons asinorum, the gilt off the gingerbread, as everyone knew.

"Please," said Ellen.

She kicked off her shoes, partly gray, partly black; and he began to drag down her panties. The panties were in the most beautiful, dark-rose color: her secret, hidden from the world.

It was all over much more quickly than anyone would have supposed. But it was wrong that it should have been so. He knew that. If it were ever to become a regular thing for him, he must learn to think much more of others, much less of himself. He knew that perfectly well.

Fortunately the heavy parcel seemed still to be where he had placed it. The grass had, however, proved to be damp after all.

He could hardly restrain a cry. Ellen was streaked and spattered with muddy moisture, her fawn skirt, one would say, almost ruined; and he realized that he was spattered also. It would be impossible for him to return to the office that day. He would have to explain some fiction on the telephone, and then again to his mother, who, however, he knew, could be depended upon with the cleaners-if, this time, cleaning could do any good. He and Ellen must have drawn the moisture from the ground with the heat of their bodies.

Ellen seemed calm enough, nonetheless, though she was not precisely smiling. For a moment, Laming regretted that she spoke so little. He would have liked to know what she was thinking. Then he realized that it would be useless anyway. Men never know what girls are thinking, and least of all at moments such as this. Well, obviously.

He smiled at her uneasily.

The two of them were staring across what might later in the year become the pitch. At present, the gray-greenness of everything was oddly meaningless. In mercy, there was still almost no one within the park railings; that is, no one visible, for it was inconceivable that in so publicly available a place, only a few miles from Oxford Circus and Cambridge Circus, there should at so waking an hour be no one absolutely. Without shifting himself from where he was seated, Laming began to glance around more systematically. Already he was frightened, but then he was almost always more frightened than not. In the end, he looked over his shoulder.

He froze.

On the seat almost behind them, the cast-iron and wood seat that Ellen had silently disdained, Helen was now seated. She wore the neat and simple black dress she had worn in the first place. Her expression was as expressionless as ever.

Possibly Laming even cried out.

He turned back and sank his head between his knees.

Ellen put her soft hand on his forearm. "Don't worry, Laming," she said.

She drew him back against her bosom. It seemed to him best not to struggle. There must be an answer of some kind, conceivably, even, one that was not wholly bad.

"*Please* don't worry, Laming," said Ellen cooingly.

And when the time came for them to rise up finally, the seat was empty. Truly, it was by then more overcast than ever: Stygian might be the very word.

"Don't forget your parcel," said Ellen, not merely conventionally but with genuine solicitude.

She linked her arm affectionately through his and uttered no further word as they drew away.

He was quite surprised that the gate was still open.

"Where shall we meet next?" asked Ellen.

"I have my job," said Laming, torn about.

"Where is it?"

"We usually call it Bloomsbury."

She looked at him. Her eyes were wise and perhaps mocking.

"Where do you live?"

"Near Finsbury Park."

"I'll be there on Saturday. In the park. Three o'clock in the American Garden."

She reached up and kissed him most tenderly with her kissing lips. She was, of course, far, far shorter than Helen.

"What about Helen?" he asked.

"You're going to the Apollo with Helen on Wednesday," she replied unanswerably.

And, curiously enough, he had then found the address for the parcel almost immediately. He had just drifted on in a thoroughly confused state of mind, and there the house obviously was, though the maid looked very sniffy indeed about the state of his suit in the light from the hall, not to speak of his countenance and hands; and from below a dog had growled deeply as he slouched down the steps.

Soon, the long-threatened rain began.

Of course, had he been a free agent, Laming was so frightened that he would not have seen Ellen again. But he was far from a free agent. If he had refused, Ellen might have caused trouble with Helen, whom he had to meet

on Wednesday: women were far, far closer to other women in such matters, than men were to men. Alternatively, he could never just leave Ellen standing about indefinitely in the American Garden; he was simply not made that way; and if he were to attempt a deferment with her, all her sweetness would turn to gall. There was very little scope for a deferment, in any case: the telephone was not at all a suitable instrument, in the exact circumstances, and with his nervous temperament. And there was something else, of course: Laming now had a girl, and such an easygoing one, so cozy, so gorgeous in every way; and he knew that he would be certain to suffer within himself later if he did not do what he could to hold on to her-at least to the extent of walking up to the American Garden and giving it one more try. Helen or no Helen. It is always dangerous to put anything second to the need we all feel for love.

It was colder that day, and she was wearing a little coat. It was in simple midbrown and had square buttons, somewhere between bone and pearl in appearance. She was dodging about among the shrubs, perhaps in order to keep warm. Laming had wondered about that on the way up.

"Hullo, stranger!"

"Hullo, Ellen!"

She kissed her inimitable kiss, disregarding the retired rail-waymen sitting about in greatcoats and mufflers, waiting for the park cafe to open.

"We're going somewhere," said Ellen.

"Just as well," said Laming, with a shiver, partly nerves, partly sex, partly cool, damp treacherous weather. But of course he had struck entirely the wrong and unromantic note. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"You'll see," said Ellen, and took his arm in her affectionate way, entirely real.

The railwaymen glowered mptionlessly, awaiting strong tea, awaiting death, seeing death before them, not interfering.

Ellen and Laming tramped silently off, weaving around bushes, circumventing crowded baby carriages.

Orsino, Endymion, Adonis: the very roads were named after lovers. Laming had never noticed that before. He had always approached the park from the south, and usually with his mother, who did not walk fast and often gasped painfully. Once in the park she had downed a whole bottle of Tizer. How they had all laughed about that, forever and a day!

Around this turn and that, in the queer streets north of the park, Ellen and Laming stole, tightly locked together; until, within the shake of a lamb's tail as it seemed, they were ascending a narrow flight of steep black stairs. Ellen had unlocked the front door, as if to the manner born, and of course she was going up first. She unlocked another door and they were home and dry. -

"Did it work out all right about your clothes? The mud, I mean?"

She merely smiled at him.

"Who lives here?"

"My sister."

"Not Helen!"

Of course not Helen. What a silly thing to say! How stupidly impulsive! Ellen said nothing.

There were little drawings on the walls by imitators of Peter Scott and Mabel Lucie Attwell, but all much faded by years of summer sun while the tenant was out at work.

Or tenants. Most of the floor space was occupied by an extremely double divan, even a triple divan, Laming idiotically speculated, squarer than square. It hardly left room for the little round white table, with pansies and mignonette round the edge. All seemed clean, trim, self-respecting. The frail white chairs for dinner parties were neatly tucked in.

"Is your sister married?"

Ellen continued silent. She stood in front of him, smiling, abiding.

He took off her coat and placed it on the hanger on the door. There was a housecoat hanging there already, sprayed. with faded yellow Chinamen and faded blue pagodas and faded pink dragons with one dot in each eye.

"She won't barge in on us suddenly?"

Ellen threw back her head. Her neck was beautifully shaped, her skin so radiant, that it seemed all wrong to touch it. She was wearing a little mauve dress, fastening up the back, and with a pleated skirt.

Laming put his hands gently on her breasts, but she did not raise her head.

When he lifted it for her, it fell forward on her front, in renewed token of uninterest in sociable conventionalities, in the accepted tensions.

Laming unfastened her dress and drew it over her head. Unskillfully though he had done it, her hair looked almost the same, and, in what slight disorder had arisen, even more alluring.

She was wearing nothing but a plum-colored garter belt and lovely, lovely stockings.

Laming wished there was somewhere where he himself could undress alone. There were various doors. The kitchenette. The bath and toilet. A cupboard or two for rainwear and evening dresses and ironing boards. It would look silly to open so many doors, one after the other. Laming drew the curtain across the window, as if that made any difference. In any case, and owing to mechanical difficulties, he had drawn it only half across the window.

He undressed with his back to her, as if that made any difference either.

She would be naked by now, and half laughing at him, half fractious, because he had never before knowingly seen a naked adult woman.

When, lumpishly, he turned to her, she had removed her garter belt, but still wore her stockings, now secured by garters. She had brought them out from

somewhere. They were bunched up in pink, violet, and black lace. She was no longer smiling. She looked as serious and ethereal as an angel on a card.

"What about-?" There was that, and everyone knew it.

"Come in," said Ellen, climbing in herself.

The immense divan was as the sea. Clinging together, he and she were drowning in it, down, drown, down, drown. As they dropped, all the way, she showed him small, wonderful things, which tied him in fetters, clogged him with weights.

Hours later, as it seemed, it was over; and until who could tell when? It had continued for so long that he was afraid to look at his watch. Post coitum omne animal triste est, as the boozy classics and history master had pointed out to the middle fifth, Laming's highest form in the school.

However, it was still daylight. Could it be the next day, Sunday? Had his mother been left alone in the house all night? Of course not, but the real trouble was the utter and total irreconcilability between this life, real life perhaps, and daily life. Laming apprehended this with a lurch like a broken leg or arm: a fracture that could never mend.

Ellen was pottering about, doing things to herself, making tea.

It occurred to Laming that exactly at the point where this life, real life, and daily life were at right angles, stood Helen, or, rather, sat on a park bench. Laming, naked in some almost unknown person's bed, actually found himself looking around the room for her, and with small starts of terror, as when jabbed by a schoolfriend's penknife.

Ellen emerged from the kitchenette with two cups of tea on a small tray. It had been a gift offer and was covered with eider ducks, the name of the firm scrupulously omitted. Ellen had straightened both her stockings and her tight, frilly garters. Laming could still feel the latter tickling his thighs when it had all begun.

Tea was just what he wanted; Ellen had somehow known that, as his mother always knew it. Ellen was drinking it only for company's sake and making eyes at him over the rim of the cup. God, the illusion there can be in a single cup of hot tea! In the first cup, anyway. But it would be quite like Helen to materialize ever so faintly, just when he was relaxing, though it would have been difficult for her to find anywhere suitable to sit in the bijou flatlet. The only armchair was filled with copies of *The Natural World*, so that Ellen was sitting on the foot of the divan, with her legs pressed together in the most ladylike degree. Her breasts were firm as cockleshells.

She rose chastely and came for his empty cup.

"More?"

He faintly shook his head. Normally, he would have accepted and probably gone on accepting, but now he felt unequal even to drinking tea. He was a haunted man.

Ellen took the cups back into the kitchenette, and he could hear her tidily washing them up. She put the milk back in the refrigerator, and what was presumably the ingredient itself back into a little cabinet which shut with a click and was probably marked *Tea*. She returned to the living room and, standing before a small octagonal looking glass in which the reproduction of "The Childhood of John the Baptist" had-previously been reflected, began to comb her silky but sturdy hair.

Laming assumed from this that they were about to depart and felt most disinclined. It was as when at last one reaches Bexhill or Gognor Regis and the beach is calling, but never before has one felt more promise to lie in mere musing in and upon one's new bed and, thus, half slumbering one's life away.

Ellen combed and combed; then she tied a wide cherry-colored sash around her breasts and reentered the divan with him. He could smell the scent she had sprayed on her neck and shoulders in the bathroom. Even her eyes were brighter than ever under the influence of some ointment. Her hand began once more to explore Laming. To his surprise, he roused up immediately,

and was bemused no more. It might have been the brief and partial breaking in of daily life that had half stupefied him. He tied Ellen's sash tighter than ever with the strength that is supposedly male; so that her bright eyes clouded like pools.

Hours later once more; it was not merely dark but black as blindfold, and they were both lying on the floor, relishing its hardness through the carpet, which stretched from wall to wall, though that was but a short way, however one measured it. Ellen's body was hard too, now that there was resistance. Their legs tangled like rubbery plants. She showed him things that can only be done in the dark, however clumsily, things he would never be able quite to evade or reject.

Laming felt an agonizing, sciatic pain and writhed upwards, though Ellen's arms were still around his waist.

He saw that from what must have been the ceiling, or at least very near the ceiling, a pair of pale eyes were looking expressionlessly down on him, on the two of them. He could even see some hint of the bone structure surrounding the eyes. Then there was another pain, like a gutting knife ripping out his tendon.

He yelled out, from the pain and from the vision. Instantly, Ellen was all softness and tenderness, a minstering angel of the midnight. He clenched his eyes shut, as he had so often done in childhood and at school, however foolish it might seem to do it when all was dark anyway.

Midnight! Or could it be even later? He had no idea what had become of his watch. He only knew that his mother must have started worrying long since. Her dependence on him was complete, so that much of the time he quite forgot about her.

He was lying on his back with Ellen on top of him, embracing him, enveloping him, enchanting him. Her released bosom pressed tenderly down on him, and her mouth rested softly on his chin. In the end, she had reconciled him to reopening his screwed up eyes, which were about the level of her head. He had to give himself a mental jerk in order to perform

the operation, but he really knew quite well that the other eyes, or face, would have gone. They never remained for very long.

When they had the light on and were walking about again, he still felt the sciatic stress, very much so. He was positively limping, though Ellen could not have been nicer about it, more sympathetic. It proved not to be midnight at all, let alone later. It was only about quarter to eleven.

"Doesn't your sister want to come home sometimes?"

"Not when we want the flat, silly."

They walked, arm in arm, to Major House station. Even the jazz on the radio had mostly stopped.

"I'm seeing Helen on Wednesday," he remarked idiotically.

"And me on Saturday," she responded. "Same time and place. OK?"

There was a kind of pause.

"OK, Laming?"

"OK," said Laming.

She kissed him softly and disappeared down the station steps with complete composure, utter serenity.

It was only just after quarter past when Laming put his key in his mother's front door. Though his mother was pale, she was so glad to see him that it was quite easy to explain that another chap had suggested that he and Laming go to the movies and that the picture had proved much longer than they had thought, and so forth. The film had been about climbing in the High Andes, Laming said, and there were wonderful shots of llamas.

"I thought they were in the Himalayas, Laming."

"These were llamas with two l's, Mumsey dear. As if they were Welsh llamas. They have almond eyes and they spit."

The explanations were practicable because he had in fact seen the film, without having bothered to tell her. It had been shown some weeks ago in the canteen next door to the office, where many of the men found their way for lunch. It was being circulated to such places by some adult educational organization. The oddest things prove in the end to have a use of some kind, Laming reflected. He had often noticed that.

"What's the matter with your leg, Laming?"

"I think I've twisted it somehow."

"Better see Dr. Pokorna on Monday before you go to work."

"It'll be quite well by Monday, I promise, Mumsey."

She still looked doubtful, as well as pale.

"I promise."

What he could never decide about her was whether she really took it for granted that girls were a matter of indifference to him.

"Something wrong with your leg, Laming?"

"I seem to have twisted it, Helen. I've no idea where."

"What have you been doing with yourself since our little party?"

"Same old grind." Really, he could not bring himself to meet her eyes. He did not see how he ever again could meet them, look right into their paleness. What was he to do?

"Not many people here," he said.

"We mustn't let ourselves be affected by numbers. We must behave and react exactly as we should if the theater were packed."

"Yes, of course," said Laming, though he did not know how he was going to do that either.

Furthermore, the curtain simply would not go up. Even though no one new had come in for ten minutes by Laming's watch, the watch that had been lost in the big bed.

"Did you enjoy our party?" asked Helen.

"You know I did, Helen."

"Ellen said she thought you didn't like her."

"Of course I liked her, Helen."

"Don't you think she's very attractive in her own way?"

"I'm sure she is."

"I sometimes feel quite a shadow when I'm with her, even though I may be that much cleverer."

"She doesn't seem to speak very much."

"Ellen's a very nice person, but she happens to be the exact opposite to me in almost every way," explained Helen. "I should adore to change places with her once in a while. Don't you think that would be great fun?"

A man in a dinner jacket had come onto the front of the stage and was reading from a piece of paper, having first assumed a pair of spectacles, while they watched it. It appeared that one of the company had a sudden attack of gastric flu; time had passed while his understudy had been sought for on the telephone; and it had now been decided that someone else's understudy should come on in the proper costume and read the part from the script.

"I thought that understudies were always waiting about in the wings," said Laming.

"I expect there isn't much money with this production," said Helen. "It's a shame about the poor fellow being ill, isn't it?"

"I've never heard of him."

"It might have been his big chance," said Helen, "and now it's gone, because the play might be off before he's better."

"We mustn't think about that," said Laming, following her earlier and more sanguine cue.

How on earth was he to entertain her at the end? After that party? What exactly would she expect? The problem had been worrying him all day. He had become involved with two girls when he could not afford even one, never had been able to and probably never would.

Descending the many steps to ground level, Helen summed up excellently: the rest of the cast had naturally been affected by the zombie in their midst, and it would be unfair to judge the play, as a play, by this single overcast representation. "I adore blank verse, anyway," Helen concluded.

Laming hadn't even realized.

"Especially this new kind," said Helen. "It can be terribly exciting, don't you think?"

Of course she gave no sign of being excited in the least, because she never did.

"Would you like a Welsh rarebit tonight, Helen? By way of a little change?"

"Oh, no, I can't eat things like cheese. Our usual cup of coffee is absolutely all I need. Besides, it makes a kind of tradition for us, don't you think?"

At the end, she suggested that next time they go to *Reunion in Vienna*, with the Lunts.

He really could not suggest that there might be difficulty in finding a free evening, and he doubted whether she could suggest it either, even in quite other circumstances.

"The Lunts are very popular," he pointed out. "We might not get. in."

"Let's try. If we fail, we can always go to something else. We shall be in the middle of Theaterland. What about a week from today?"

"Could we make it Thursday?"

They agreed to meet in the queue that time.

They still shook hands each time they parted, though, by now, only in a token way. Advance in intimacy was marked by her omission to remove her glove for such a trifling, though symbolic, contact.

"You tie me up nicely and then you can do what you like with me. Afterwards, I'll tie you up and do things with *you*." *Tot* Ellen it was a quite long speech, the longest, he thought, he had ever heard her make. They had already been in the flatlet a good couple of hours.

It had become much warmer, as befitted the later part of May, and she had been wearing a short-sleeved blouse, instead of a sweater; a beach skirt instead of the fawn one. The blouse was in narrow honey and petunia stripes, with a still narrower white stripe at intervals. Ellen had left most of the buttons unfastened. The retired railwaymen, some without their jackets, had just stared and then began talking with self-conscious absorption, to their fellow workers, willing her to go, to be burnt up, while they diverted attention. Ellen was also wearing little-girl knee socks. Laming was desiring her far past the point of embarrassment all the way to the flatlet.

He could not even touch her, let alone take her half-bare arm.

But when, at that later point, he acted upon her suggestion, he had to admit to himself that he lost initiative: he did not really know what he *could* do, what would be far enough out of the ordinary to please her. And when he appealed to her for suggestions, she began to display that all too familiar female amalgam of mockery and fury.

It was when he struck out at her with the first thing that came to hand that he saw Helen standing in the window with her back to the room. She too wore a lighter dress, one that Laming had not seen before; cornflower-colored. Previously, he had himself had the window behind him, or at his

feet, but of course she could not have been there or she would have cast a shadow, and right across Ellen's body. Or was that true of whatever was in the room with him and Ellen?

The figure in the window was all too manifestly sunk in trouble and despair. One could almost hear the sobs and see the bitter tears falling on the new dress. Even the hair was obviously disordered across the face.

Laming threw away the object he had snatched up, totally unromatic and unsuitable in any case.

"What's the matter now?" inquired Ellen.

"Look!" This time Laming actually pointed a shaking finger. "Look!" he cried again.

"What at?"

On the previous occasions he was unsure whether or not Ellen had seen what he saw. He also realized quite well, then and now, that it would probably remain uncertain, no matter what she said or did.

"Look at *me* instead," said Ellen quietly. "Do something nice to me, Laming!"

He looked back at the window, but of course the two of them were once more along, or seemingly so.

"Oh, my God," cried Laming.

"Do something nice to me, Laming," said Ellen again. "Please, Laming."

She was becoming ever more talkative, it would seem; and he had realized that there were things one could do, which involved talk, very much so. The popular antithesis between talk and action is frequently false, but in no case more so than after meeting a girl in the American Garden.

Laming liked Reunion in Vienna better than any other play he could remember. He could identify almost completely with the archduke in white

tunic and scarlet trousers, for whom Haydn's stirring anthem was played whenever he appeared, and for whom ladies wore lovely evening dresses almost all the time. There was sadness in it too, though; if there was no hope at all of ever living like that (because nowadays no one did), what point was there to living at all? Laming was so carried away by the finale to Act One that he momentarily forgot all about Helen, and when the intermission came, he could think of nothing to say to her. She might perhaps like the play, at least up to a point; but it could not conceivably mean as much to her as it meant to him.

What Helen proved really to like was Lynne Fontanne. "I should adore to look as elegant as that," she said.

"You often do," responded Laming, though it cost him an effort, and she actually took his hand for a moment as they sat there.

How strange life is! Laming reflected. If he had somehow been richer, he could obviously have been a Lothario. As things were, Helen's hand frightened him. Also she was wearing the cornflower dress he had first seen the previous Saturday in the flatlet.

"I love coming here with you," she said later, when they were in the cafe. "It's an adventure for me." If only she could have *looked* more adventurous! Laming supposed it was that which was wrong.

Moreover, the three girls who served in the place, all obtrusively married, had long ago come to recognize Helen and Laming when they entered and to take them more and more for granted. Helen quite probably liked that, but Laming did not. Also they solicited with increasing cheekiness for more substantial orders than single cups of coffee. Laming was perfectly well aware that the three girls were laughing at him every minute he was in the place and probably for much of the rest of their time together too.

"What about *Careless Rapture* next week?"

"We shall never get in to that."

"The gallery's *enormous*."

He had not known, because he had never entered the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane.

Again they agreed to meet in the queue. That evening, Helen had continued to insist upon paying for herself, most honorably.

"I adore Ivor Novello's way of speaking," said Helen. "It gives me the shivers."

"Isn't he-?"

"What does *that* matter, Laming? We must be open-minded, though of course I wouldn't actually *marry* Ivor."

Laming could think of no rejoinder.

In any case he needed no reminding that he was a man marked down.

And to think that he had started all this himself, taken the initiative quite voluntarily! At least, he supposed he had. In what unpredictable ways just about everything worked out! Most things, in fact, went into full reverse, just as was always happening at school! If you want peace, prepare for war, as the classics and history master had admonished them.

"I can't *wait* till next time," said Helen unexpectedly, as they parted. Not that even then her eyes lighted up, or anything like that. Laming realized that work, with poultry statistics in the civil service was hardly calculated to put a light in anyone's eyes. He quite appreciated the need to be fair. It was simply so difficult to act upon it..

Laming thought of Ellen's eyes.

But apparently the immediate trouble was to be that Helen's inability to wait until next time had to be taken literally. Laming began to see her all over the place.

The first occasion was the very next morning, Thursday. He had been sent out by the office manager to buy sponge cakes to go with everyone's midmorning coffee, and he had glimpsed her back view on the other side of

the street, still in that same dress, purchased or brought out for the summer that was now upon them all.

He was very upset.

Nonetheless, the second occasion proved to be that same afternoon. Laming had been dispatched by the partner who was in charge of buying to an address in E. 1., almost Whitechapel, Laming thought; and, in that unlikely region, he saw Helen in her dress climbing aboard a No. 25 bus, not ten yards in front of him. She was having difficulty with what appeared to be a heavy black bundle. Indeed, on account of it, she might well have spotted Laming, and perhaps had. Of course it would have been unreasonable to suppose that in the course of a single day she would have had time or reason to change her dress. Still, Laming was now not merely ordinarily frightened, but for the time almost deprived of thought, so that he could not for the life of him recall what he had been told to seek in E.1. The buying partner spoke very sharply to him when he crept into the office empty-handed (he had managed to lose even his library book) and ashen.

And after Laming had been totally unable to explain himself to his mother, and had then passed one of his utterly sleepless nights, came, on Friday morning, the third occasion; and, this third time, he walked straight into Helen, head-on. Things had begun to move faster.

He had left the office quite voluntarily, saying that he needed to be in the fresh air for a few minutes, and had walked into Helen within a bare two hundred yards from the outer door, where Tod sat, the one-eyed custodian. It was before Laming had even reached the appliance place on the corner, about which everyone joked.

What was more, he could have sworn that not for a second had he seen her coming, even though there were very few people on the pavement, far, far fewer, he would have said, than usual at that hour. If he had detected her, if there had been even the slightest tremor of warning, he would have shown the swiftest possible pair of heels the street had ever seen, convention or no convention, bad leg or no bad leg; and if he had been run over in the process, would it have mattered very much?

Helen was wearing another neat summer dress (after all, a whole sleepless night had passed), this one white creeping foliage on a brick wall background, as Laming could see quite well; and she was again carrying something weighty, this time slung over her left shoulder, which gave her an utterly absurd resemblance to the cod-carrying fisherman in the Scott's Emulsion advertisement. There was no advertisement that Laming knew better than that one; standing, as it did, for *mens Sana in corpore sano*.

"Hullo," said Laming, in a very low, very shivery voice, audible to no one but her.

She simply trudged past him in her white court shoes, very simple in design. She showed no sign of even seeing him, let alone of hearing his greeting. Under other circumstances, it might have been difficult to decide whether she looked alive or dead. Her burden duly took the shape of a long, gray anonymous object. It seemed to be heavier than ever, as Helen was staggering a little, deviating from a perfectly straight course.

Laming clung sickly to the railings until a middle-aged woman with hair made metallic by curlers came halfway up the area steps and asked if he was all right.

"Quite all right," replied Laming, a little petulantly.

The woman washed her hands of him on her flowered apron.

But then a police constable materialized.

"Had a little too much?"

Laming thought it best to nod.

"Work near here?"

Laming nodded again.

It was fortunate that all the partners had left together for luncheon before Laming was brought back to the office by an arm of the law.

The next day, Saturday, Laming's leg was suddenly much worse. Indeed, it hurt so much that he could hardly walk the short distance to the park, and the American Garden was, of course, on the far side. His mother looked extremely anxious as she stood on the porch, kissing him good-bye again and again. It was quite terribly hot.

Still, much was at stake, and Laming was determined to meet Ellen, even if he did himself a permanent injury. He would be most unlikely ever again to find anyone like Ellen in his entire life, so that, if he lost her, a permanent injury might hardly matter. Confused thinking, but, as with so much thinking of that kind, conclusive.

When he arrived, he found that the railwaymen were actually lying on their backs upon the grass. They were in their braces, with their eyes shut, their mouths sagging. It was like the end of a military engagement, the reckoning.

And, this time, there was no sign at all of Ellen, who had previously been there first. Laming looked in vain behind all the shrub arrangements and then lowered himself onto one of the seats which the railwaymen normally occupied. He extended his bad leg, then lifted it horizontally onto the seat.

A fireman in uniform sauntered past, looking for dropped matches, for tiny plumes of smoke. There was a sound of children screeching at one another, but that was over the brow of the hill. Laming would have taken off his jacket if he had not been meeting a lady.

"Hullo, Laming."

It was Helen's voice. She had crept up behind his head in complete silence.

"Ellen asked me to say that she can't come today. She's so sorry. There's a difficulty in the shop. We're both a bit early, aren't we?"

Laming pushed and pulled his bad leg off the seat, and she sat beside him.

She was in the brick-wall dress with the mesh of white foliage: She looked cool and dry as ever. How could Laming be there early? He must have

made too much allowance for infirmity.

"Say something!" said Helen.

What could anyone say? Laming felt as if he had suffered a blow on the very center of the brain from a lead ingot. His leg had begun to burn in a new way.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you," said Helen.

Laming managed to smile a little. He still knew that if he said anything at all, it would be something foolish, ludicrously inappropriate.

"Please take me to Kelly's flat." It seemed to be a matter of course.

"Kelly?" Even that had been copycatted without volition.

"Where you usually go. Come on, Laming. It'll be fun. We might have tea there."

"I can only walk slowly. Trouble again with my leg."

"Ellen says it's just around the corner. We can buy some cakes on the way."

They set forth, a painful journey, where Laming was concerned. They circumvented the inert railwaymen. In one or two cases, Helen stepped over them, but that was more than Laming cared to risk.

Helen spoke. "Won't you take my hand, as it's Saturday?"

"I'd like to, but I think I'd better concentrate."

"Take my arm, if you prefer."

Orsino, Endymion, Adonis: how differently one feels about these heroes when one re-encounters them amid such pain, such heat!

Nor did they buy any cakes; there was no shop, and Laming did not feel like going in search, even though he realized it might be wise to do so.

"I forgot," exclaimed Laming, as they turned the last and most crucial corner. "I haven't got any keys. I think we need two at least."

"Ellen lent me hers," said Helen. She had been carrying them, not in her handbag, but all the time in her hand. They were on a little ring, with a bauble added. Helen's gloves were white for the hot weather, in lacelike net.

Helen and Laming were inside the flatlet. Helen sat on the huge divan, not pulling down her dress, as she usually did. Laming sat on one of the little white chairs, at once bedroom chairs and informal dinner-table chairs.

"What do you and Ellen usually do first?" asked Helen. She spoke as if she had kindly volunteered to help with the accounts.

"We talk for a bit," said Laming, unconvincing though that was when everyone knew that Ellen seldom spoke at all.

"Well, let's do that," said Helen. "Surely it can do no harm if I take off my dress? I don't want to crumple it. You'd better take some things off too, in all this heat."

And, indeed, perspiration was streaming down Laming's face and body, like runnels trickling over a wasteland.

Helen had taken off her white shoes too.

"Do you like my petticoat?" she inquired casually. "It came from Peter Jones in Sloane Square. I don't think I've ever been in North London before."

"I like it very much," said Laming.

"It's serviceable, anyway. You could hardly tear it if you tried. Have you lived in North London all your life?"

"First in Hornsey Rise and then, after my father died, in Drayton Park."

"I adored my father, though he was very strict with me."

"So *your* father's dead too?"

"He allowed me no license at all. Will you be like that with your daughter, Laming, when the time comes?"

"I don't expect I'll ever have a daughter, Helen." Because of his leg, he would have liked a softer, lower chair and, for that matter, a more stoutly constructed one. But the springy, jumpy divan would not be the answer either, unless he were completely to recline on it, which would be injudicious.

"Do take something off, Laming. You look so terribly hot.". But he simply could not. Nor had he any knowledge of how men normally behaved, were called upon to behave, in situations such as this. Ellen had made all easy, but the present circumstances were very different, and of course Ellen herself was one of the reasons why they were different.

"I *am* looking forward to *Careless Rapture*," said Helen. "I adore Dorothy Dickson's clothes."

Laming had never to his knowledge seen Dorothy Dickson. "She's very fair, isn't she?" he asked.

"She's like a pretty flower bending before the breeze," said Helen.

"Isn't she married to a man named Souchong?" "Heisen," said Helen. "I thought it was *some* kind of tea."

"After a week without leaving the department, it's so wonderful to talk freely and intimately."

There it was! A week without leaving the department, and he had supposed himself to have seen her yesterday, and twice the day before, and all over London!

As well as feeling hot and tortured, Laming suddenly felt sick with uncertainty; it was like the very last stage of *mal de mer*, and almost on an instant. Probably he had been feeling a little sick for some time.

"Laming!" said Helen, in her matter-of-fact way, "if I were to take off my petticoat, would you take off your coat and pullover?"

If he had spoken, he would have vomited, and perhaps at her, the flatlet being so minute. "Laming! What's the matter?"

If he had made a dash for the bathroom, he would have been unable to stop her coming in after him, half-dressed, reasonable, with life weighed off-and more than ordinary people, it would seem, to judge by her excessively frequent appearances. So, instead, he made a dash for the staircase.

Holding in the sick, he flitted down the stairs. At least, he still had all the clothes in which he had entered. "Laming! Darling! Sweetheart!"

She came out of the flatlet after him, and a terrible thing followed.

Helen, shoeless, caught her stockinged foot in the nailed-down landing runner and plunged the whole length of the flight, falling full upon her head on the hall floor, softened only by cracked, standard-colored linoleum. The peril of the fall had been greatly compounded by her agitation.

She lay there horribly tangled, horribly inert, perhaps with concussion, perhaps with a broken neck, though no blood was visible. Her petticoat was ripped, and badly, whatever the guarantee might have been.

Laming could well have been finally ill at that point, but the effect upon him was the opposite. He felt cold and awed, whatever the hall thermometer might show; and he forgot about feeling sick.

He stood trembling lest another tenant, lest the wife of a caretaker, intrude upon the scene of horror. There was a flatlet door at this ground-floor level, and a flight of stairs winding into the dark basement. But there was no further sound of any kind; in fact, a quite notable silence. It was, of course, a Saturday, the weekend.

Laming opened the front door of the house, as surreptitiously as one can do such a thing in bright sunlight.

There was no one to be seen in the street, and about eyes behind lace curtains there was nothing to be done before nightfall. Laming could scarcely wait until nightfall.

When outside the house, he shut the door quietly, resenting the click of the Yale-type fitment. He felt very exposed as he stood at the top of the four or five North London steps, like Sidney Carton on the scaffold, or some man less worthy.

He dropped down the steps and thereby hurt his leg even more. Nonetheless, he began to run, or perhaps rather to jogtrot. It was hot as Hell.

He cantered unevenly around the first corner.

And there stood Ellen; startled and stationary at his apparition. She was in a little blue holiday singlet, and darker blue shorts, plain and sweet. Apart from Ellen, that thoroughfare seemed empty too.

"Laming!"

She opened wide her arms, as one does with a child.

Matted and haggard, he stared at her. Then he determinedly stared away from her.

"I waited and waited. In the American Garden. Then I thought I'd better come on."

She was adorable in her playgirl rig, and so understanding, so truly loving.

But Laming was under bad influences. "Who's Kelly?" he asked.

"A friend," she replied. "But you haven't seen him."

He glared brazenly at the universe.

Then he pushed rudely past her, and all the way home his head sang a popular song to him, as heads do in times of trouble.

His mother spoke with urgency. "Oh, Laming. I'm so glad to see you back."

He stared at her like a murderer who had the police car in the next street.

"You look tired. Poor Laming! It's a girl isn't it?"

He could only gaze at the floor. His leg was about to fall right off. His brain had gone rotten, like an egg.

"There's always the one you take, and the one you might have taken."

He continued to stare at the eroded lentil-colored carpet

"Lie down and rest. I'll come back for you soon."

Agonizingly he flopped onto the hard chesterfield, with its mustard-and-cress covering, much worn down in places.

In the end, she was with him again. She wore a short-sleeved nightdress in white lawn, plain and pure. Her hair had long been quite short. She looked like a bride.

"It's too hot for a dressing gown," she said, smiling. He smiled wanly back.

"Let me help you to take your things off," she said.

And when they were in bed, her bed, with the windows open and the drawn blinds carelessly flapping, she seemed younger than ever. He knew that she would never change, never disappoint. She did not even need to be thought about.

"Laming," she said. "You know who loves you best of all."

He sank into her being.

His leg could be forgotten. The heat could be forgotten. He had sailed into port. He had come home. He had lost and found himself.

Growing Boys (1977)

> *What, you deny the existence of the supernatural, when there is scarcely a man or woman alive who has not met with some evidence for it!*

LUCIEN

> It is, indeed, singular that western man, while refusing to place credence in anything he cannot see, while rejecting absolutely omens, prophecies, and visions, should at the same time, as he so often does, deny the evidence of his own eyes.
>
> OSBERT SITWELL

The first time it occurred to poor Millie that something might really be wrong was, on the face of it, perfectly harmless and commonplace.

Uncle Stephen, the boys' great uncle, had found the words, conventional though the words were. 'You're much too big a boy to make messes like that, Rodney. And you too, of course, Angus.'

'Angus wasn't making a mess,' Rodney had retorted. 'There's no need to bite his head off too.'

'Keep quiet, boy, and clean yourself up,' Uncle Stephen had rejoined, exactly as if he had been father to the lads, and a good and proper father also.

In reality, however, Uncle Stephen was a bachelor.

'I'll take you up to the bathroom, Rodney,' Millie had intervened. 'If you'll excuse us for a few moments, Uncle Stephen.'

Uncle Stephen had made no effort to look pleasant and social. Rather, he had grated with irritation. When Millie took Rodney out of the room, Uncle

Stephen was glaring at her other son, defying him to move, to speak, to breathe, to exist except upon sufferance.

It was certainly true that the boys lacked discipline. They were a major inconvenience and burden, overshadowing the mildest of Millie's joys. Even when they were away at school, they oppressed her mind. There was nowhere else where they were ever away, and even the headmaster, who had been at London University with Phineas, declined to accept them as boarders, though he had also declined to give any precise reason. When Millie had looked very pale, he had said, as gently as he could, that it was better not to enter into too much explanation: experience had taught him that. Call it an intuition, he had experienced. Certainly it had settled the matter.

She had supposed that, like so many things, the headmaster's decision might have related to the fact that the boys were twins. Twins ran in her family, and the two other cases she knew of, both much older than she was, did not seem to be happy twins. None the less, until the coming of Rodney and Angus, and though she would have admitted it to few people, she had always wished she had a twin herself: a twin sister, of course. Mixed twins were something especially peculiar. She had never herself actually encountered a case, within the family, or without. She found it difficult to imagine.

Now, Millie no longer wished for a twin. She hardly knew any longer what she wished for, large, small or totally fantastic.

All that notwithstanding (and, of course, much, much more), Millie had never supposed there to be anything very exceptional about her situation. Most mothers had troubles of some kind; and there were many frequently encountered varieties from which she had been mercifully spared, at least so far. Think of Jenny Holmforth, whose Mikey drank so much that he was virtually unemployable! Fancy having to bring up Audrey and Olivia and Proserpina when you had always to be looking for a part-time job as well, and with everyone's eyes on you, pitying, contemptuous, no longer even lascivious!

But upstairs in the bathroom, it came to Millie, clearly and consciously for the first time, that the boys were not merely too big to make messes: they were far, far too big in a more absolute sense. Rodney seemed almost to fill the little bathroom. He had spoken of Uncle Stephen biting his head off. That would have been a dreadful transaction; like... But Millie drew back from the simile.

Of course, for years no one could have failed to notice that the boys were enormous; and few had omitted to refer to it, jocularly or otherwise. The new element was the hypothesis that the irregularity went beyond merely social considerations. It existed in a limbo where she and her husband, Phineas, might well find themselves virtually alone with it, and very soon.

Millie had read English Language and Literature and knew of the theory that Lady Wilde and her unfortunate son had suffered from acromegaly. That appeared to have been something that ran in Lady Wilde's family, the Elgees; because Sir William had been quite stunted. But of course there were limits even to acromegaly. About Rodney and Angus, Millie could but speculate.

When all the clothes had been drawn off Rodney, she was appalled to think what might happen if ever in the future she had to struggle with him physically, as so often in the past.

*

Re-entering the drawing room, Rodney pushed in ahead of her, as he always did.

Angus seized the opportunity to charge out, almost knocking her down. He could be heard tearing upstairs: she dreaded to think for what. It mattered more when her respected Uncle Stephen was in the house.

She looked apologetically at Uncle Stephen and managed to smile. When her heart was in it, Millie still smiled beautifully.

'Rodney,' roared Uncle Stephen, 'sit down properly, uncross your legs, and wait until someone speaks to you first.'

'He'd better finish his tea,' said Millie timidly.

'He no longer deserves anything. He's had his chance and he threw it away.'

'He's a very big boy, Uncle Stephen. You said so yourself.'

'*Too* big,' responded Uncle Stephen. 'Much *too* big.'

The words had been spoken again, and Millie knew they were true.

Uncle Stephen and Millie talked for some time about earlier days and of how happiness was but a dream and of the disappearance of everything that made life worth living. They passed on to Phineas's lack of prospects and to the trouble inside Millie that no doctor had yet succeeded in diagnosing, even to his own satisfaction. Millie offered to show Uncle Stephen round the garden, now that it had almost stopped raining.

'It's quite a small garden,' she said objectively.

But Uncle Stephen had produced his big, ticking watch from his waistcoat pocket, which sagged with its weight. There was this sagging pocket in all his waistcoats. It helped to confirm Uncle Stephen's identity.

'Can't be done, Millie. I'm due back for a rubber at six and it's five-eleven already.'

'Oh, I'm terribly sad, Uncle Stephen. Phineas and I have raised the most enormous pelargoniums. Mainly luck, really. I should so much like you to see them.' Then Millie said no more.

'My loss, Millie dear. Let me embrace my sweet girl before I go.'

He crushed her for a minute or two, then stepped back, and addressed Angus.

'Stand up and give me your hand.'

Angus soared upwards but kept his hands to himself.

'I mean to shake your hand,' bawled Uncle Stephen, in his quarter-deck manner; even though he had never mounted a quarter-deck, except perhaps on Navy Day.

Angus extended his proper hand, and Uncle Stephen wrenched it firmly.

When Millie and he were for a moment alone together in the little hall, something that could not happen often, Uncle Stephen asked her a question.

'Have you a strap? For those two, I mean.'

'Of course not, Uncle Stephen. We prefer to rely on persuasion and, naturally, love.'

Uncle Stephen yelled with laughter. Then he became very serious. 'Well, get one. And use it frequently. I've seen what I've seen in this house. I know what I'm talking about. Get two, while you're about it. The Educational Supply Association will probably help you.'

'Phineas will never use anything like that.'

'Then you'd better consider leaving him, Millie dear, because there's trouble coming. You can always make a home with me and bring the boys with you. You know that, Millie. There's a welcome for you at any time. Now: one more kiss and I must vamoose.'

As soon as the front door shut, Angus, who had been watching and listening to the scene through the hole the twins had made in the upstairs woodwork, almost fell on her in every sense.

Back in the drawing room she saw that Rodney, released from thrall, had resumed his tea, and had already eaten everything that had been left. Noting this, Angus began to bawl.

It might be all right later, but at that hour Millie was afraid lest the neighbours intervene: Hubert and Morwena Ellsworthy, who were ostentatiously childless.

'Don't cry, Ang,' said Rodney, putting his arm tightly round Angus's shoulder. 'Uncle Stephen always hogs the lot. You know that.'

Angus's rage of weeping failed to abate.

Rodney gave him a tender and succulent kiss on the cheek.

'We'll go to the Lavender Bag,' he said. 'I'm still hungry too. I think I've got the worms. I expect you have as well. Race you. Ready. Steady... Go.'

As the race began on the spot, the picking up and clearing up for Millie to do were not confined to the tea things.

The Lavender Bag was a café at the other end of the Parade. It was run by the Misses Palmerston, four of them. It was a nice enough place in its way, and useful for the release through long lunchtimes and teatimes of high spirits or low spirits, as the case might be. Millie went there often, and so did her friends, though soon she would have no friends. Some of them distrusted her already because they knew she had a degree.

Now Millie suddenly set down the cake tray she was holding. She took care not to let the large crumbs fall to the carpet.

'Oh God,' gulped Millie, sinking to the edge of the settee and almost to her knees. 'God, please, God. What have I done to be punished? Please tell me, God, and I'll do something else.'

Only some outside intervention could possibly avail.

*

She had never been very good at having things out with anyone, not even with girl friends, and Phineas had undoubtedly weakened her further. All the same, something simply had to be attempted, however recurrent, however foredoomed.

To make a special occasion of it, she put on a dress, even though it had to be a dress that Phineas would recognise: at least, she supposed he must. The boys were still rampaging about at the Lavender Bag, which in the summer

remained open for light snacks until 8P.M. They liked to run round the tables wolfing everything that others had left on plates and in saucers. The Misses Palmerston merely looked on with small, lined smiles. Simultaneously the boys were normal children and flashing young blades.

'Why *should* you feel at the end of your tether?' enquired Phineas. 'After all, every day's your own. Certainly far more than my days are mine.'

If only one could give him a proper drink before one attempted to talk seriously with him; that is, to talk about oneself!

'It's the boys, Phineas. You don't know what it's like being at home with them all day.'

'The holidays won't last for ever.'

'After only a week, I'm almost insane.' She tried to rivet his attention. 'I mean it, Phineas.'

Millie knew extremely well that she herself would be far more eloquent and convincing if Phineas's abstinence had not years ago deprived her too, though with never the hint of an express prohibition, but rather the contrary. When she was reading, she had learned of the Saxons never taking action unless the matter had been considered by the council, first when sober and then when drunk. It was the approach that was needed now.

'What's the matter with the boys this time?' asked Phineas.

Millie twitched. 'They're far too tall and big. How long is it since you looked at them, Phineas?'

'Being tall's hardly their fault. I'm tall myself and I'm their father.'

'You're tall in a different way. You're willowy. They're like two great red bulls in the house.'

'I'm afraid we have to look to *your* family for that aspect of it. Consider your Uncle Nero, if I may venture to mention him.'

'I don't like him being called that.'

'But you can't deny he's bulky. There's no one of his build anywhere up my family tree, as far as I am aware. For better or for worse, of course. There are more troublesome things than sturdiness, especially in growing boys.'

Millie did not have to be told. She had often reflected that Phineas, seeping tiredly over the settee at the end of the day's absence, was like an immensely long anchovy, always with the same expression at the end of it; and in the next bed it was, of course, far worse.

'Then you're not prepared to help in any way? Suppose I have a breakdown?'

'There's be no danger of that, Millie, if only you could persuade yourself to eat more sensibly.'

'Perhaps you could persuade your sons of that?'

'I shall try to do when they are older. At present, they are simply omnivorous, like all young animals. It is a stage we go through and then try to pass beyond.'

'Then you do admit that they *are* like animals?'

'I suppose it depends partly upon which animals.'

Millie knew perfectly well, however, that for her they were not like animals, or not exactly; and despite what she had said to Phineas. They were like something far more frightening.

'Uncle Stephen was very upset by them before you came home.'

Phineas merely smiled at her. He had all but finished the lactose drink which he consumed every evening before their meal.

'Uncle Stephen said we ought to see what discipline could do.'

'Discipline would hardly prevent the boys growing up,' observed Phineas.

And it was still a matter of hours before it was even sunset.

The boys could be heard approaching in what had become their usual way. They stumbled in through the open French window.

'Got any good grub in your pockets, Dad?' shouted Rodney.

With a smile, Phineas produced a dun-coloured bag of huge, gluey toffees; something he would never have put into his own mouth.

The boys fell into chairs and began to pass the bag from hand to hand.

'Mum going to cook supper soon?'

'I expect so, Angus.'

'What's it going to be, Dad?'

'Better ask her, Rodney.'

It was not, as he knew, that he aimed to instil manners. It was merely that he could not care less.

One thing Millie had particularly resented was that every single evening she had to produce two very different meals, and then be silently sneered at if she herself chose the more exciting one, or consumed any scrap of it.

Now Millie was past resentment. Panic had taken its place.

'We need food, Dad. You don't want us to outgrow our strength.'

'Besides, we're twins,' said Angus.

It was hard to see where that came in, but Millie knew quite well that somewhere it very much did.

Everything was fundamentally her own fault. She was perfectly well aware of that. Everything always is one's own fault.

'Our reports come yet, Dad?'

'I don't think so, Rodney.'

'You can't put them on the fire this time, because it's summer, but you *will* put them down the *topos*?'

'Unopened, Dad?' put in Angus. He was half on his feet again, and redder than ever.

'*Unopened*, Dad,' insisted Rodney, though perhaps more calmly.

'Torn up, if you like,' said Angus.

'We shall have to see,' said Phineas. 'Shan't we? When the time comes, that is.'

He rose from the settee and walked quietly from the room.

'Oh Mum,' said Rodney, jumping up and down. 'Do get on with it.'

The patience of the young is soon exhausted.

'We're hungry,' Angus confirmed. 'Remember, we only had salad for lunch. Muck, we called it.'

It had been a cut-up which Phineas had not eaten the previous evening. One could not simply throw it away; and Phineas would never accept such things unless they were completely fresh. It was the trouble with food of that kind that no one ever wanted it all, and it then became useless. Nor was the household made of money. Phineas not only lacked prospects: he lacked a suitable income also. Unhappily, Phineas was an intellectual without either creativity or judgement. Millie had realised it even during those early days in the Camargue, when Rodney and Angus were being conceived.

In the kitchen, she was shaking so much she gashed the index finger of her left hand. It would, of course, have mattered more if she had been lefthanded, as were Phineas and the boys; but it was a nasty enough cut, which bled far too much, so that fair-sized gouts fell on the newly prepared

vegetable matter, which thereupon had to be slowly picked over a further time. Blood oozed through Millie's handkerchief and spotted the dress she had specially put on.

At the same time, the big fry-up for the boys was beginning to run out of fat.

In the end, they came charging in. Millie was weeping, of course, and in more and more of a muddle. Once, she had never muddled things, but quite the contrary: perhaps that was why she wept now.

'For God's sake, Mum! We're hungry. We told you.'

'Hungry as hunters.'

What had that originally meant? A kind of horse? A kind of tiger? A kind of man?

'What is it, Mum? What are we getting?'

'Chops and liver and bacon and things,' replied Millie in a very low voice, possibly inaudible above the sizzle. 'I've hurt my finger.'

'We could eat the entire animal,' said Angus.

Phineas always lay on his bed while a major meal was in preparation, and Millie had to ascend and summon him, because the boys simply did not do it, however often she asked them.

*

Four days later, Millie's finger was as bad as ever, and her left hand almost unusable. She knew that incurable illness often first manifested itself through minor injuries which failed to clear up.

'Oh Mum, do get better!' admonished Angus at breakfast when she let slip the teapot.

'It's entirely a matter of eating the right things,' observed Phineas mildly, 'though, naturally, it'll take some months before you can expect to enjoy the benefits.'

Phineas himself was eating a small quantity of muesli in skim milk. He always used a tiny teaspoon for such purposes.

The flap of the front-door letter-box was heard: presage everywhere of Charon's final shoulder-tap, bone against bone.

The boys made a dash, as they did each day; but this time Millie had reached the door of the room before them. She stood there facing them.

'We're going for the post, Mum.'

'I'm going for it this morning. You both sit down, please.'

'It may be our reports, Mum.'

'I'm going this morning, Angus.'

They were only a foot or two away, but before they could lay hands on her, she had not merely whipped open the door but also snatched the key out of the lock, flashed from the room, and managed to lock the door on the other side: all this with the real use of one hand only.

For the moment she had proved as effective as she used to be, but there had been something strange about the incident; which had all begun with a vivid dream she had had the previous night, so vivid that she remembered it (or imagined it) still, and in detail: a small dream really, but prophetic.

For the moment Phineas had been left to manage the two roaring boys. The French window was in the drawing room, but soon the boys would be out through the dining-room casements and making mischief of some kind. Happily, the big drawing-room window was never opened until after breakfast. The boys had never as yet intentionally smashed their way in or out, but Millie dreaded to see their huge faces gazing at her, diminishing her, from the world outside.

None the less, Millie paused for a moment, and quite consciously.

Much was at stake if her dream could be taken at all seriously.

It could. Millie had advanced into the hall and the delivery had proved to consist of two accounts rendered and a packet with the school crest upon the envelope.

Millie went back into the drawing room, and, sitting down, even straightened the crease in her jeans. Then, while in the locked room the abominable hubbub raged on, she calmly opened the boys' reports.

Reports they had been in her dream, and dire ones: at once a burden, but also, in certain ways, a release, or a faint hope of release. The actual packet proved, however, simply to contain a letter, together with some appeal forms for reconditioning the school chapel. The letter, addressed to Phineas, was from the deputy headmaster. Millie read it.

> Dear Mr. Morke,
>
> I know you will forgive my writing on behalf of the Headmaster, who has unfortunately been in Hospital since the middle of the Spring Term, as you may possibly have heard from your Sons.
>
> I very much regret to tell you that the Trustees, to whom the matter has been referred in the absence of the Headmaster, take the view that no useful purpose would be served by the return of your Sons to the School at the commencement of the Term now ahead, that is to say, the Autumn Term.
>
> It is the view of the Trustees, in which I am bound to say I fully concur, that the Boys are too physically mature to benefit from the ordinary course of Tuition in Class, however excellent. Perhaps they may be regarded as outside and beyond the normal school disciplines.
>
> In the circumstances, there would seem no advantage to our delivering the usual Reports upon the conduct of the Boys during

the Summer Term, just past. Doubtless you will have drawn your own conclusions from the Reports relating to previous Terms, and will scarcely be surprised by the Decision which the Trustees have reached.

It is the custom of the School to extend Best Wishes to all its Old Boys when finally they move towards New Fields of Endeavour; and I am sure that the Headmaster, with whom, as I understand, you are on terms of long-standing and personal friendship, would wish me to make no exception in the present cases.

May I venture to remind you of the Outstanding Account in respect of the Boys' attendance during the Summer Term, and including a number of important Extras? The Bursar requests me to take this opportunity of remarking that he would be most grateful for a settlement during the next seven days, as he is keeping his Books open for this single item, and is being pressed by the School's Honorary Accountants. I am sure you will understand.

Yours sincerely,

PHILIP DE SODA

(REVD. M.A., B.D.)

Millie rose, unlocked the door, and re-entered the dining room, holding the letter high above her head.'

'There are no reports, Phineas. 'They've been expelled.'

When the boys had been much younger, it might have availed to hold the letter up there, but now it was pointless, because they were far taller than she was, as well as in every way more brawny. The letter was out of her hands in a flash.

It was very unlikely that they could understand it, and doubtful if they could even read all of it, but she herself had provided the clue, and at least they

could take in the signature.

'It's the Sod!' cried Angus. 'The Sod wrote it.'

'Give it here,' commanded Rodney. Within seconds the floor was littered with tiny scraps of paper, and the boys were standing shoulder to shoulder against the world, completely obscuring the framed photograph of their mother on a horse.

'What are you going to do now, Phineas?' enquired Millie.

Phineas was, as always, making a point of being undisturbed. He continued to chase the last particles of saturated muesli with his toy teaspoon.

'Well?' enquired Millie. 'Our sons have been expelled from their school. You'll have to do something with them.'

'Was the term *expulsion* actually employed in the letter?'

'Of course not. Schoolmasters don't use it nowadays. They're afraid of libel actions.'

'Well then, we mustn't exaggerate. It's not at all uncommon for a headmaster to reach the view that a boy would fare better in some other school. Nowadays, there's no question of a stigma at all. The change in itself is often entirely beneficial.'

He drew a crispbread from the packet, broke it in half, returned one half to the packet, and began to break up the other into reasonably symmetrical pieces on his plate.

Each of the boys now had his arm round the other's shoulder, in the style of Tweedledum and Tweedledee. But they had no other resemblance to Tweedledum and Tweedledee

'If you don't do something, Uncle Stephen will,' said Millie.

The boys extended their thick red tongues at her, but Phineas's eye was glancing at the *Guardian* which lay on the table for him alone to read and

take to work.

Millie went upstairs, locked the door of the bedroom, and began looking through her old address book. It had little to offer, apart from varying shades and intensities of nostalgia and regret.

She lay down on her unmade bed, turning her back on Phineas's unmade bed.

She could not think while the boys were in the house, or, for different reasons, Phineas either.

She could hear birds singing, and, from the next house, screeching music for early housewives. She knew that they were supposed to choose the records for themselves.

Then, duly, there was a din of the boys leaving. At the moment their craze was to do something with dogs in the local wood – any dogs, as she understood it.

She had no idea what it was that they did, nor did she wish to know. The wood was of course deserted on a weekday morning, apart from the usual misfits straying about, and unlikely to present much of a problem to boys such as Rodney and Angus.

Millie gave it a little longer, lest she walk into Phineas then she unlocked the door and went down.

Phineas had departed for work, with all the others. She had feared that the letter from Mr. de Soda might have held him back. She began to collect the torn pieces into a small plastic bag that was lying about, because she proposed to keep them. It was a surprisingly long job: she could not but remember that the mills of God tear exceeding small. Then she began to clear up, and, later, to wash up. She could count on a little tranquillity until the boys returned, raging for their midday meal.

But the bell rang, and then there was that same flop from the letter-box: somewhat less menacing, however, when it is presumably a matter not of a

postal delivery, but more probably of a harmless circular.

Millie went out quite calmly. Duly, it was a publicity leaflet, a throwaway.

> Your Fortune is in your Hands Consult Thelma Modelle
>
> NOW
>
> Modern Palmistry Absolutely Private and Confidential Normally no need for an appointment Nothing Spooky Nothing embarrassing
>
> 4 The Parade
>
> 'There is no reason why the human hand should not provide as good a guide to individual destiny as any other.'

The concluding quotation was unascribed. Millie fancied that it came from Aldous Huxley. She seemed to remember encountering something of the kind when trying to read one of Huxley's works at Oxford. The leaflet was inexpensively produced in simple black on simple white. It was quite small.

Millie had almost finished her immediate chores. There was little incentive to embellish the tasks. She stuffed the bag of torn-up paper into her handbag, because she could think of nothing else to do with it at the moment and set forth for 4 The Parade. Reason and careful thought had proved alarmingly unfruitful. The moment had come to give the subliminal a trial; if that was the applicable word. An omen was an omen, and there were few of them.

*

Number 4 The Parade was her own fish shop, selling rough vegetables and packet cheese as well. She had never previously had occasion to heed the number. Upstairs had lived the rheumatism lady, who went round all the old folk in her little car. Millie was aware that lately the rheumatism lady had moved to a proper clinic, paid for by the ratepayers, because everyone was talking about it. Now at the foot of the stairs there was an arrow, with a

curious curve in it pointing upwards, and the name THELMA MODELLE newly painted at the heart of it in grey. Plain THELMA would, perhaps, have been too much like an unregulated fairground; and changing times were rendering the title 'Madame' obsolete even in such cases as this. There was nothing to do but ascend.

Thelma Modelle came out on to the little landing. Her jeans were pale green and she wore a sleeveless grey jumper which looked as if it were woven from used raffia. As promised, there was to be no attempt at formality or mystification.

Thelma Modelle had a smooth dark brown mop, falling over one side of her angular, sallow face; and the enormous, rather empty eyes of the seer or pythoness.

Indeed, at first she stared at Millie for a perceptibly long time without uttering a word.

'Well, come in,' she said at last, as if there had been some demur.

They were in the rheumatism lady's small sitting room, though already it looked much more run down. The rheumatism lady's little water-colours had been replaced by wall cards bearing emblems of the zodiac; somewhat stained, and by no means a complete set. There was a round black table in the centre of things, with two black composition chairs opposite one another.

'Sit down,' said Thelma Modelle, still a little petulantly, 'and call me Thelma.'

Millie sat, as one does at such times; but Thelma continued to stand. She was observing Millie.

'Would you prefer to smoke?'

'I've given it up. My husband made me stop it.'

'Then why are you carrying a packet of Players in your handbag?'

Millie felt that she had turned pale and puce at the same time.

'It's an unopened packet. I suppose you can see that too.'

'One thing I can't see is why you're here. What are you looking for?'

'Your leaflet came through my door. Just this moment, in fact. So will you please read my palm, or whatever it is you do?' Millie extended her hand across the table.

'That's the wrong one,' said Thelma. 'But never mind. It would be no good with you in any case. I'll see what the cards have to say.'

She picked up a working pack from the mantel behind her. Millie would have supposed there would be shuffling, perhaps cutting, certainly a careful and symmetrical laying out. But all Thelma did was chuck six or seven apparently random cards across the surface of the table.

'You're in trouble right enough,' said Thelma.

'What sort of trouble?' asked Millie steadily.

'You'll know the details best.'

'What's going to happen about it?'

'It's going to get worse.'

'Yes, I suppose it's bound to do that.'

'I should try running away, if I were you. Hide. Change your name. Change your appearance. Change everything.'

'Join the raggle-taggle gypsies, in fact?' After all, one must at times seek some proportion in things.

'Please!' exclaimed Thelma. 'I *am* a gypsy.'

'I'm so sorry.' But that was wrong too. 'I wasn't meaning to be rude.'

'The gypsies wouldn't *have* you.'

'Why ever not?' But Millie was by now hardly surprised, hardly capable of surprise.

'You're marked.'

'In what way? How am I marked? You don't mean that lacrosse accident?'

'No. Not that.'

Millie reflected silently for a moment. If Thelma Modelle would sit down, as consultants normally do, it could be that much easier.

Millie spoke again. 'Please tell me more.'

'The cards won't go any further.'

'Well, something else then.' After all, there was a crystal on the mantel too, though Millie had never seen one in her life before (it was smaller than she had supposed); and some sort of large, shapeless thing leaning against the wall.

'If you want to know more, it will have to be sex.'

Millie had heard at Oxford of 'sex magic' and its alleged dangers.

'I don't think I want that,' she said.

'That's quite all right,' said Thelma rather nastily. 'I shouldn't advise you to find out more anyway.'

'Why ever not? Is it really as terrible as all that?'

'It might make you mad.'

The familiar Shakespearian phrase was really too much. Millie rose to her feet.

'How much do I owe you?'

Thelma's expression had become very odd.

'No money. Just look in again. While you still have time of your own.'

'You've made a mistake there,' said Millie. 'The boys aren't going back. They've been expelled.'

'I've never claimed to be right every time.'

Millie managed to smile a little. 'Please take some money. I have profited by your frankness.'

'Not from you,' said Thelma. 'I've told you what you can do.'

'I'll think about it,' said Millie.

'You can come and live here if you've nowhere else to go.'

'I can go to my Uncle Stephen. Actually he's pressing me.'

'You can do whatever you like,' said Thelma.

There was a scuffing up the stairs, and another client appeared. It was Dawn Mulcaster, mature, frustrated, and twittery as ever. She and Millie exchanged very faint smiles but no words. Millie sped downwards.

The curious thing was that, though nothing could have been more depressing and foreboding than Thelma's insights, yet Millie felt noticeably more buoyant than on her outward journey. As in the matter she had last night dreamed of, the burden was at the same time a release, or a faint hope of release. She was even able to muse smilingly upon a fortune-teller's obvious need of a receptionist; and upon the positively comical discrepancy between this particular fortune-teller's publicity and her performance. Perhaps the discrepancy was mainly in tone. All the same, surely the interview had been 'spooky' in the extreme? Dawn Mulcaster would certainly be finding it so. Millie felt that she had done better than Dawn was

likely to be doing. In fairness to Thelma Modelle's publicity person, Millie had to acknowledge that she did not feel in the least 'embarrassed'.

She stopped in the street for a moment. A more precise thought had struck her. Her cut finger was completely healed. Somehow she had even parted with the unpleasant bandage. She smiled, and continued homewards.

The boys stormed back, wolfed their food without a word to Millie, and stormed out again.

Millie washed up after the three of them; circulated round The Parade and The Avenue, shopping, meditating; put together two totally different evening meals; and then went upstairs to lie on her bed, in order to prepare for another confrontation with Phineas. She must keep up the pressure or go mad, as Thelma Modelle had predicted.

Indeed, when Millie fell asleep, she found she was dreaming of Thelma's establishment, where she, Millie, now appeared to have a job of some kind, as she was seated at the toilet table in what had been the rheumatism lady's bathroom, and sorting through hundreds, perhaps thousands, of invoices in the desperate hope of finding her own. The invoices were on paper of different sizes and textures, and in many different handwritings, mostly illegible. Millie was amazed by the mental processes that must lie behind the ways in which many of the bills were laid out. Only those which had been drafted by Uncle Stephen were fully orderly. When Millie awoke, it occurred to her to wonder whether Thelma herself could write at all, or whether she relied mainly on bluff, as did Rodney and Angus though no one ever dared to mention it.

There was the noise of creeping about downstairs. Then Phineas's voice floated up the stairwell: 'Millie!' She shrivelled. 'Millie, where are you?'

It was far, far too early for his return. Could he have lost his job? That might be yet another burden which was not a burden entirely, but very faintly a forerunner.

Millie threw off the eiderdown, pulled on a jacket, and sauntered downstairs.

Phineas was positively prancing from room to room. It was impossible that he could have been promoted, because, in his position, there was no real promotion. His step seemed light and gay, as with the man in the ballad.

'I've been adopted!' cried Phineas, unable to contain himself until she had reached the ground floor, terra firma.

'Whatever for?'

'As Liberal candidate, of course. At North Zero.'

'Where's that?'

'It's in Cornwall and Andrew MacAndrew says I should have every chance.'

She had been perfectly well aware that Phineas was frequenting the local Liberal Association and bringing their literature home. It was one of various activities of his that resulted in her being so often alone with the boys.

'Does the Party find the money for your deposit, or do you have to do it?'

'I haven't the slightest idea. I haven't thought about it.'

'Perhaps the boys can go down and canvass for you?'

'They're too young, as you can perfectly well imagine for yourself. I'm afraid I shall have to sacrifice much of my family life, and leave the boys more in the hands of their mother. I notice that you haven't congratulated me, Millie.'

'If it's what you want, I'm pleased for you, Phineas. Provided, that is, that you find a new school for the boys before you set out.'

'I haven't been able to think much about that, as you can imagine. I feel it is something their mother can perfectly well do for them, if the necessity should arise.'

'I can and shall do nothing of the kind, Phineas. Finding a school for boys like that is the father's job. I mean it, Phineas.'

She was almost glowing with resolution. She realised that to display moral qualities demands practice, just as much as intellectual and manual qualities. She had never really attended when, down the years, such truths had been hammered into her. But she also knew that much of her relied upon the boys being out of the house.

'I had hoped you might be pleased for me,' said Phineas, entering the sitting room, and draping himself. 'Could I have my lactose, please?'

'It's too early. It's only just past teatime.' Phineas eschewed tea, because of the tannin, which affected both his colon and his autonomic structure.

'I'm going to get myself a cup of tea,' said Millie. 'And then I want to go on talking seriously.'

In her heart, she was not in the least surprised to find, when she returned, that Phineas had taken himself off. Perhaps he had gone out to look for the boys. He liked to delude himself that he could 'join in' their play, though Millie knew better, knew that he was accepted on the very thinnest of sufferance, for short periods only, and only for ulterior reasons. In the boys' eyes, there was very little to choose between Phineas's status and hers. She knew that, even if he did not.

Millie took her little tray upstairs, locked the bedroom door, took off her jacket once more, and wriggled beneath the eiderdown. She had brought up the Family Size packet of Playmate biscuits, really meant for the boys.

But, contrary to expectation, Phineas drifted back in no time. Elation at the thought of the new and more fulfilling life that lay before him had probably made him restless. Soon, he was tapping at their bedroom door.

'Let me in, please.'

'I'm having a rest. I'll come out when it's time for your supper.'

'Where are the boys?'

'In the wood with the dogs, as far as I know.'

'It might be better if they were encouraged to stay more in their own home.'

'That's their father's job.'

'Millie, what are you doing in there?'

'I'm lying down, and now I'm going back to sleep.' She knew that by now there was not a hope of it, though she had spoken as positively as she could.

So positively, indeed, that there was quite a pause. Then Phineas said, 'I might as well have my lactose now. I've had a lot to think about today.'

Grumpily, Millie emerged. Rest and peace had gone, as well as slumber.

'Let me carry the tray,' said Phineas. 'It's right that I should do these things when I'm here.'

He was not at all used to the work, and had to descend the stairs very slowly, like a stick-insect.

'What is going to happen to your job?' asked Millie, as soon as the tray was on the sink-surround, more or less in safety.

'That must come second. In life, one has to make such decisions.'

'Meanwhile, what pays the boys' school fees? They won't have them at the ordinary local school. You know that.'

'I shall have my Parliamentary salary in the end, and shall of course make you an allowance for things of that kind. Could I please have my lactose?'

'So you propose quite calmly to live entirely on me. On my little income from Daddy's estate?'

'Not if you do not wish it. You and the boys can do that, if necessary; and lucky we are that it should be so. I myself can apply for a maintenance grant.'

'Do you mean the dole?'

'Of course not. I refer to the Applecroft Fund for supporting Liberal candidates. I did not intend to approach them but I always can if you lack all interest in your husband's career in life.'

'Phineas!' Millie tried to sound positively menacing. 'I tell you again that I accept no responsibility for the future of the boys, financial or otherwise. They are out of my hands.'

'Well, Millie, in the very, very last resort, that's a matter for the common law, is it not? But there is no need at all for it to come to that.'

'It would be bad for your chances, if it did.'

'Not nowadays. Your notion of the world often seems antediluvian, Millie dear.'

'The boys neither love nor want me. Not that they love or want you either.'

Quite unselfconsciously, Phineas smiled. 'What boys feel for their father is something a woman cannot understand, not even their mother. It's something that really is antediluvian, Millie.'

'If you had any understanding whatever of what goes on around you, you'd know better than to talk such rubbish.'

'No one is more concerned than I am about what goes on everywhere in the world.'

His eyes were filled with a need for his mission to be understood and appreciated; for the lactose that by now really was due.

Millie set about preparing it.

*

'Where are the boys?' asked Phineas, as the sun sank in unnoticed glory.

'I expect they're at the Lavender Bag, as they were last night.' Millie looked at her watch; the boys having stopped the clock so often that it no longer

seemed to her worth paying for repairs. 'No. The Lavender Bag will have shut some time ago.'

'Perhaps it's some kind of special evening?'

'They would have come here and gorged themselves and then gone back.'

'Well, what *are* we to think, Millie? It really might be better if you took more interest in what your sons do. I shan't be able to give so much time to it in the future. You must understand that.'

Millie went to the record-player and put on Honegger's *Pacific 231*. The next piece on the record was Mossolov's factory music. Before the record could reach Gravini's *Homage to Marinetti*, Millie turned the machine off.

'Would you like your supper? I should like mine.'

'I shall have to take more care over what I eat now that I have so much greater responsibility.'

But when, shortly afterwards, the moment came, he seemed to pick and niggle very much as usual. Her own appetite was undoubtedly the more disturbed of the two.

*

In the end, the police arrived, though not until it was quite dark. Most unusually, it was Phineas who unwound himself and let the man in. For this reason, Millie did not learn his rank: lacked the opportunity to glance at his official card. The man was not in his blues, but dressed overall by a multiple outfitter.

'Good evening, madam. Do either of you know anything of two men named Angus Morke and Rodney Morke? They've given this address.'

'They are our two sons, officer,' said Phineas.

'Indeed, sir? I should hardly have thought it. Certainly not in your case, madam. These two are fully grown men. In fact, rather more than that.'

'Don't be ridiculous, officer,' said Phineas. 'They are our sons, and we know exactly how big they are.'

'I wonder if you altogether do, sir. If you don't mind my saying so, madam. It took a whole squad to get them under any kind of control. And, even then, there are some very nasty injuries which the Court will be hearing about tomorrow, in addition to the other charges. The Sergeant is worried about whether the cells will hold them. The station isn't Parkhurst Prison. It's only intended for quiet overnight cases. But I mustn't do all the talking. I've only come to make the usual routine enquiries. The two men – boys, if you prefer, madam – do really reside here, then?'

'Of course they do,' said Phineas. 'This is their home.'

'If you say so, sir. Now, how old would each of them be?'

'They are twins. Surely you must have realised that? As far as I recall, they are rising sixteen.'

'You mean that they're fifteen, sir?'

'Yes, I think that's right. Fifteen.'

'It's incredible, if you don't mind my saying so, madam.'

'In the course of your work,' said Phineas, 'you must have realised that some boys grow faster than some other boys.'

It was high time for Millie to speak. 'What have the two of them done?'

'What are they *alleged* to have done?' Phineas corrected. 'If anything, of course.'

The officer made it clear that from now on, and whatever the rule book might say, he preferred to deal with Millie.

'I'm afraid the charges are rather serious, madam. In fact, we've never before had anything to compare with it since the station first opened, which of course was when most of the houses like this one were being built. We

haven't had much violence in the suburb, *serious* violence that is; though of course it's growing fast pretty well everywhere in the world.'

'What have they done, officer? Please tell me. I'm perfectly able to face it.' Again, the additional burden that could at the same time be a further remote prospect of freedom!

'Remember,' put in Phineas, 'that it's still only mere allegation. It is well known that the police exaggerate; sometimes very greatly. I speak as an adopted Parliamentary candidate.'

'Do you indeed, sir? For somewhere round here, that is?'

'No, not locally. But it makes no difference.'

'Well, madam,' said the officer, with professional quietness, 'as for the charges, they include a long list of assaults, fifteen at least so far, and we are expecting more. Some of those we already have are very serious indeed. Not what we're used to round here, as I have remarked. More like the Glasgow docks in the old days, I should have said. Then there's a lot of damage to property. A lot of damage to a lot of property, I should have put it. Doors stove in and roofs ripped about and ornaments smashed. There are a couple of attempted rapes expected to be reported soon, from what the other officers say. A couple at least.'

'In these times, there's no such thing as *attempted* rape,' objected Phineas. 'It's a rape, or it isn't a rape, and most people are very doubtful about it even if it's supposed to be proved.'

'And that's not to mention the injuries inflicted on the officers, which we don't like at all, madam, especially in a quiet district like this.'

'No,' said Millie soberly, 'I'm sure not.'

'Now, if I could have a few details of the education these lads have had? Supposing them to have had any, of course. But it's no matter for joking, all the same. It's an offence too, not to educate a child.'

Millie realised that the night air was coming in through the front door which Phineas had left open: the night air of a hot summer. Phineas made no move, and Millie did not care to leave him just then even for a single moment. Besides, closing the outer door might lead to new suspicions.

By the end of it, and indeed long before that, Millie knew perfectly well that Phineas should have produced the whisky, but that, thanks to Phineas, there was no whisky in the house. Most assuredly she could not be absent long enough to make tea, even supposing the officer to be interested in tea at that hour.

'If the accused really are what the law calls minors,' said the officer, 'then a parent will be required to attend the Court.'

'Of course my husband will attend the Court,' said Millie.

'Perhaps you too, madam? A mother can often influence the Justices more than a father.'

Millie smiled. 'I shall remember that, officer.'

'Not that a case of this kind is likely to remain with Petty Sessions for long. It will be simply a matter of a quick committal, as far as I can see.'

'I'm sure you are once more greatly exaggerating, officer,' said Phineas, smiling in his turn.

'You'll be there to hear for yourself, sir,' replied the officer, entirely reasonable.

When he had gone, Millie found it almost impossible even to speak to Phineas.

'I'm not sharing a room with you,' she managed to say.

'Please yourself,' said Phineas. 'After today's news, I've still a great deal to think about and plan, as anyone but you would see at once.'

*

Next morning, and really quite early next morning, the childless Hubert Ellsworth was the first with the local news; or with a bit of it.

In his old yachting jumper, with part of the club name still on it, and shapeless grey bags splashed with oil from his garden workshop, he stood there trying to arrange his scattered locks.

'I thought I ought to tell you first, Phineas, as, after all, we are neighbours. I've heard that there are two sex maniacs on the loose. Apparently, the authorities feel we should warn one another to keep everything bolted and barred. What times we live in! Eh, Phineas?'

Millie, who had overheard this in her nightdress, could already see, from the bathroom window, Morwena Ellsworthy sealing every aperture with passe-partout, despite the season, and even pulling down blinds.

The next arrival was young Graham, the local weekly's cub reporter, as people described him, and the only one who left the office very often. Girls tended to tell him that they liked the name Graham.

That time, Millie opened the door.

'May I come in for a few moments, Mrs. Morke? It's really rather important.'

Millie had never before spoken to him, though, like everyone else, she knew who he was. He was a nice young lad, everyone said. In any case, he was by now sufficiently practised in his profession never to take even the hint of a negation as an answer.

'Well, what is it?' asked Millie. 'Do sit down.'

Phineas, having dealt with Hubert Ellsworthy, had gone back to bed. In the marital bedroom: Millie had spent the night on the lounge sofa-convertible which, at the time of hire-purchase, she had, consciously or subconsciously, made sure really was long enough and wide enough to live up to its brochure.

'You've heard the news, Mrs. Morke?'

'What news in particular?'

'The police station in The Approach has been completely wrecked. I've never seen anything like it,' said young Graham very seriously.

'Well, what can I do? Would you like a cup of coffee?'

'Not just at the moment, Mrs. Morke, though thanks all the same. The thing is that the Station Inspector tipped us the wink that your two boys were being held for all that damage last night. And now, presumably, they've made a getaway. Would you care to give me a statement?'

'No,' said Millie.

'Are the boys here, Mrs. Morke? After all, it's their home.'

'I have nothing to say,' said Millie, hoping she had the formula right.

'Then, presumably, they *are* here? Don't worry, I shan't give them away. Nor do *you* have to give them away. You can just say whatever comes into your head. It doesn't much matter what it is, really.'

Millie could see that he was only trying to be kind.

'Nothing. So would you please go? I'm sorry to turn you out, but I'm sure you'll understand.'

'Rum tykes, aren't they? Sorry, I suppose that's not a very nice way of talking to their mother. My kid brother told me about the month or whatever it was they spent in the under-seven. They made a mark there all right, from what Matheson had to say. Marked everyone, in fact. Do please give me a statement of some kind, Mrs. Morke. Anything you like. Just anything.'

'I'm sorry,' said Millie. 'I really am. I know you're only doing your job.'

'Well, I suppose there's not much more I can do this time, but you're famous now, Mrs. Morke, and there'll be others coming fast in my footsteps. Not

that I've missed a scoop. Not personally, that is. I don't suggest that.'

'I'm glad,' said Millie, meeting his generosity at least halfway.

'And I'm sorry you're in trouble, Mrs. Morke. I really am. You're still a very nice-looking girl. If I may put it that way.'

'I don't see why you shouldn't,' said Millie. 'Well, that's it, wouldn't you say?'

*

Millie opened her handbag and carefully combed her hair. She went upstairs.

Phineas lay there, reading Minutes.

'Phineas! I'm leaving you.'

'Oh, please calm down, and let's have breakfast.'

'Get it yourself. I'm packing and going. I'll collect the rest of my things as soon as I can. The things that are left. Before the boys smash them too.'

'Millie!' cried Phineas, while she bustled around with a quiet efficiency she had not known for years. 'Millie, don't you realise that this is the moment in all their lives when our sons are likely to need their mother most? Surely you must see that for yourself? The moment in their lives when *I* need you most too?'

'I've done all I can,' said Millie. 'You're full of educational theories. Now's the time for you to give them a real trial. You. Not me.'

'At least come with me to the Court? Let's have breakfast quietly and consider what line to take. I'm sure the whole thing is quite grossly exaggerated. The police do that, you know. I keep saying so.'

'It would be quite difficult to exaggerate in any way about the boys.'

'But you're their mother, Millie!'

'Perhaps that's how I know. You learn nothing.'

Replete and bursting though it was, she shut her suitcase with new strength. It still bore her maiden name:MELANIEPIGOTT. Why should she not return to that? When in due course she had left Uncle Stephen's abode and started a life of her own? The green suitcase had been a joint present from her parents on her twenty-first birthday. At the time, she had wondered how long the family name would still be hers; but now it might be hers once more, and for a very indefinite period. When empty, the suitcase was delightfully weightless; when full, delightfully substantial.

'I'm not going to bother with goodbye,' said Millie.

Phineas clutched at her physically. His overlong arm was as the tentacle of an undernourished octopus.

'Millie, do at least try to be sensible. Just get breakfast, and we'll talk it all over as much as you like.'

She threw his elongated hand back on the bedspread.

As she bore her packed suitcase briskly up The Drive, she reflected that two days ago she could hardly have lifted the thing from the bedroom floor.

She wondered how long it would be before the inevitable reaction and collapse.

*

Uncle Stephen saw to it that Millie wanted for nothing.

Every morning he brought her the loveliest, most fragrant breakfast in bed. Every evening he lingered in her room, tucking her in, adjusting the ventilation and positioning of the curtains, putting away any clothes she had left about, gossiping about the small events of the day, taking away her shoes in order to give them a rub.

He prepared most of the other meals too. As he pointed out, he would have had to feed himself in any case, and having to feed her too made the whole thing into a work of joy. He had many outside engagements: bridge, bowls, the rifle and revolver ranges, the committee of the small amateur soccer club, the British Legion, the Skeleton A.R.P., the Patriotic Alliance (which was often in a state of inner schism, and therefore particularly demanding); but Millie could never for one moment doubt that she constituted the primary demand both upon his heart and even upon his time. The undiagnosed trouble inside Millie had ceased even to demand diagnosis.

'You do spoil me, Uncle Stephen. It's lovely.' She lay on the settee in lounging pyjamas and matching surtout (as the manufacturers termed it). She had never been able to bother with garments of that kind before, but now Uncle Stephen had bought them for her at Katja's in the new Vanity Market, and she had helped to choose them too. She had rather looked down on such shops and on such clothes, but that had been ignorance and the wrong kind of sophistication. It was almost impossible to believe that Phineas lived only eleven and a half miles away as the crow flew, if any crow should be so misdirected.

'I like being spoilt, Uncle Stephen,' said Millie.

'I love to do it, girl. You're all I have, you know that, and always have been.'

That must have been what Phineas would have called an exaggeration, but it was true that Uncle Stephen, so far as was known, had at all times 'looked after himself'. Now he had a thick mop of silky white hair, like a wise old lion, and the same green eyes as his sister, Millie's mother, and as Millie herself.

'All the same, I can't stay for ever,' said Millie coyly.

'Why on earth not? First, *I'll* look after *you*, and do it with love in my heart. Then, when I'm past it, *you'll* look after *me* – well, some of the time. In the end, I'll leave you all I've got. I've no one else. Remember that. It's not much. But it will be enough.'

'I'll remember, Uncle Stephen, and thank you. All the same, a woman nowadays is expected to lead a life of her own. I was all set to do it.'

'You've tried that sort of thing once, girl, and you've seen what happened.' Uncle Stephen's eye wandered away from her, which was unusual. 'I wish I could put a hand to one of the rattans I used to have.'

'What are they, Uncle Stephen?' asked Millie, though really she knew fairly well.

'Disciplinary instruments, my love. Disciplinary instruments. Never had one out of my right hand during all the years I was in the Archipelago.'

'I wonder if anything's happened by now?' Millie spoke a little drowsily. The wine at dinner had been South African, and she had fallen badly out of practice.

'You let sleeping dogs lie. Never trouble trouble until trouble troubles you.'

She smiled at him. It would be absurd to argue about anything.

'Carry me to bed, Uncle Stephen.'

*

She dreamt that she and Thelma Modelle were climbing Everest together. They were both garbed in the latest chic, waterproof, windproof, coldproof clothing, and carried little axes, silvery in the sun. Thelma, the gypsy, was deputising as a Sherpa. It was all exceedingly enjoyable, and not at all too steep for Millie's new energies. The summit lay straight ahead. They might have tea when they arrived there; or Thelma might have to have ideas of her own about a suitable gypsy celebration.

*

How many months later was it when Millie opened the *Daily Telegraph* and saw the familiar headline:LIBERAL LOSESDEPOSIT? Apparently the sitting member for North Zero had fallen over a cliff, or at least been discovered by children dashed to pieces on the rocks below. The coroner

had returned an open verdict, and a by-election had followed. Previously Millie's eyes must have glided over these events.

Uncle Stephen brought her the *Daily Telegraph* or the *Sunday Telegraph* with her early-morning tea; and *The Imperialist* every time there was a new issue. That day, when a little later he came up with her breakfast, two small, heavenly-smelling kippers and the perfect toast upon which she could always rely, she was pensive.

'Uncle Stephen, tell me. Did they ever catch those boys? I suspect you know all the time.'

'I know nothing that you don't know, little girl.'

She eyed him. 'What exactly does that mean? Do you know the answer to the question I asked?' She spoke quite roguishly.

'I do not. I know what my answer would be if I only had the chance. Now eat your scrap of porridge, or it'll go cold. I'll sugar it for you.'

Millie dragged herself upwards. She really preferred to eat in a sprawling position, but Uncle Stephen liked to see more of her.

'Tell me, Uncle Stephen, have there been any more happenings? Like the one on the night before I left. I simply don't read the reports of things like that.'

'That's the self-protective instinct, my little love, and you could do with more of it, not less.'

'But have there, Uncle Stephen? I'd rather like to know.'

'Nothing that anyone could get a grip on. Or nothing that's come my way. I don't spend all day reading the newspapers. It can get hold of you as poisonously as the television, if you once let it.'

'You're hiding something, Uncle Stephen.'

'That I am not. There are these violences all over the world every minute of the day. Everyone's a villain without proper discipline. I haven't noticed the names of your two lads in particular.'

'And you haven't heard anything locally either?'

'Not a word. I'd be out in no time if I had, after what's been done.'

The last words very nearly convinced Millie.

'Let me pour your chocolate,' said Uncle Stephen.

But immediately he spoilt it all by speaking further.

'They'll have shot up a lot further by this time,' he observed. His eyes were searching round the room, as they always did when the subject of the boys arose.

'Thank you, Uncle Stephen,' said Millie, as he stopped pouring. 'It's a beautiful breakfast. When I've finished it, I'd like to sleep a little more. Then I'll come down and give you a hand.'

He took the hint quite quietly. He merely said, 'I see now that you're looking pale. Don't you worry about helping me. I can easily bring up your little lunch when the time comes.'

'You *are* good to me, Uncle Stephen.'

But, as soon as he had left the room and closed the door, Millie began to heave; and in no time, while trying to muffle the noise, she was being copiously sick into the article provided in well-found houses for that and other purposes: as sick as she had been, without cessation as it had seemed, during the long months before the two boys were born.

*

Really there could be no question of Millie even attempting to lead a life of her own as, like so many women, she had originally, in a vague way,

intended. She was afraid to leave the house, and even more so after what Uncle Stephen had so' casually said.

That she had good reason to lie low was confirmed by the episodes that followed.

It was more than a year after Millie had left Phineas, and the gold of summer was fast dissolving into the copper of autumn, when one night Millie stirred in her sleep to see a big face pressed against the panes of her first-floor bedroom window. Whether it was Angus's face or Rodney's face, which of their faces, she would probably not by now have known in any case. It was an unseemly blot on the October moonlight, then it ducked.

What was more, her window was open, as at night it always was. The boy was far too big to climb right in, but he could easily have inserted a huge arm, perhaps reached to the bed, and then strangled or humiliated her. Millie had realised from the first that the boys must have a perfectly clear idea of where she was, even though she emerged so seldom, and Uncle Stephen never recommended otherwise. What had decided the boys to re-enter her life now? She had seen only one of them, but was sure that the other was there also, because the other always was. She suspected that by now their combined strength could throw down the entire house. And very possibly they were growing still. Boys by no means always cease to grow at sixteen or seventeen.

She drew on her kimono and ran to Uncle Stephen's room. She knocked at his door, as she had done before when hungry during the night, or when merely lonely.

'Come in, girl. Come in.'

'Uncle Stephen. The boys are back. One of them has just looked through my window in the moonlight. I think I'm going to be sick again.'

'Come in with me, little love. I'll look after you and protect you. That's what I'm doing in your life. That's what I'm here for. You know that.'

Fortunately, it was a very large bed. Uncle Stephen had brought it back from the East; from gorgeous, sanctified Goa, now for ever lost.

'When I was young, I could never in my life have even imagined anything so frightening,' said Millie. 'Not until the boys were born. Or actually a little before that. When Phineas and I were on our honeymoon. In France, and then in the marshes behind Ariano. I never dared to read horror stories and ghost stories.' She snuggled towards Uncle Stephen.

'No man and no woman knows anything of the troubles they are going to meet with in life. Or I take it they'd succeed in dodging them,' said Uncle Stephen. 'They're supposed to be sent to form and mould us, but my idea is to form and mould *them* whenever possible. Remember that.'

'You're the most wonderful uncle,' Millie murmured, though she was still shivering and gulping.

'I'll stay with you ten minutes while you calm down and arrange your pinafore, and then I'm going hunting.'

'No, Uncle Stephen! It's too dangerous. They're watching the house. They're *immense*.'

'Many times in my life I've been under siege. Each time, in the end, I burst out and destroyed everything in sight. I'm hard to hold, Millie.'

'Things have changed since those days, Uncle Stephen. It's sad, but it's true. Even *The Imperialist* admits it. That was the bit I read you, when you ordered me to stop. There's nothing for either of us to do nowadays but escape. A fortune-teller told me that last year, and now it's come true.'

'I know all about times changing, none better,' said Uncle Stephen, holding her close. 'The fact remains that *I* have *not* changed. I am older, unfortunately, but otherwise exactly the same. Also I have weapons, I have strategy and tactics, and I have experience. I am going to give those cubs the lesson they've needed since their first birthday. I learned, my little love, to deal with growing boys in a harder school than Eton and Harrow or any of those places.'

'I'm not going to let you try. You're over-confident. Those two are like children of the future.' She was appalled. 'Perhaps they *are* children of the future?'

'I'll admit that they're too big for their boots,' said Uncle Stephen drily.

'If you go anywhere near them they'll harm you. We're just going to wait for the daylight. I'll stay with you if you'll let me. Then we'll steal away somewhere for a bit. Somewhere nice. You've always said you could afford it, if only circumstances had been different. Well, circumstances *are* different, whether we like it or not. We could go and stay in an hotel at Southampton and you could look at the different ships going to places. You would like that, wouldn't you?'

'And if everyone behaved in that way?' enquired Uncle Stephen. 'If everyone did, what would become of our country? Things are rough enough already. You're as bad as that so-called man of yours, Millie.' But he spoke affectionately, none the less, cuddling and caressing her, not meaning his comparison very seriously.

'Uncle Stephen, don't be silly. They're not ordinary boys you can either pamper or stand in the corner. They're *enormous.* I told you what the man from the police station said. They're quite beyond handling by any single individual.'

'All I know is that they're boys, and that's enough. I don't want to leave you alone, as you know perfectly well, my little pet, but I'm going. You just lie in my bed until I'm back. And don't worry. I'm here to keep you from all harm. And I have weapons. Remember that.'

He squeezed her hand, and clambered out into the night.

Soon he was on the roof, directly above her. She could hear the slotting of iron into iron, or was it nowadays steel into steel? When she had lived beside the Heath as a small child during the Second World War, the A.T.S. girls operating the anti-aircraft unit concealed among the evergreen gorse had made that noise all day as they took the long guns to pieces and put them together again. Uncle Stephen possessed artillery of his own. It was

included in the weapons he had mentioned; nor did it consist in a couple of squat, serio-comic muzzle-loading Peninsular War mortars, looking like pugs. On the contrary, Uncle Stephen could mount at least three quite modern-looking pieces, painted not black but dark green as gorse and palpably requiring expert knowledge to discharge satisfactorily; the kind of knowledge that the girls on the Heath had been acquiring during the daytime. He had explained to Millie that these guns were designed by the authorities primarily for withstanding a concerted rush. She wondered when he had managed to dismantle at least one of them in the room downstairs and reassemble it on the roof of the house without her hearing or noticing a thing. She might have been impressed by his foresight, but instead resurrected her suspicions that Uncle Stephen had all along known something that he had failed to pass on.

There was a flash and a crash: quite startlingly like 6:30 or 7:30P.M. when Millie had been but a tot.

Another and another. Millie fully realised that this could not continue for long; not in the modern world. Somehow it would be stopped, however justified it might be, even by the narrowest legalistic standard of self-defence and of protecting an unarmed mother.

Concurrently, Millie was subdued by a confused mêlée of feeling about Angus and Rodney; even though she had never been able within herself to accept that they were authentically her own offspring.

A shadow passed between the moon and the casement. Surely the boys should have been intelligent enough to take cover? How, without doing so, had either of them survived Uncle Stephen's cannonade? Uncle Stephen was the least likely of men to aim and then miss. He kept in continual practice, as in so many directions.

Another flash and crash: though this time in the latter was a curious rending sound, as if the gun barrel were about to burst asunder. Millie had heard of guns soldering up through being fired continuously day and night. Probably Uncle Stephen's gun had not of late been fired often enough to be in prime condition. Millie realised the danger that Uncle Stephen might be running

from the gun exploding within itself and shattering into smithereens, as she understood that guns not infrequently did.

But by now the official legions were massing. Millie could hear outerspace blastings of fire engines, of ambulances, of police cars; and between them the insect whinings of television vans and radar. It was much as the moment when an escape from a concentration camp is first notified. She ran to the window.

Functionaries were swarming over and around machines to make sure that nothing remained unaccounted for in the designated area, except criminally. It was an ideal spot for such an operation, as Uncle Stephen's house stood in comparative isolation at a corner of the woods; a public open space owned by the Council.

Millie ran back to her own room. It would be most unwise to turn on a light, and possibly the current had already been chopped at the main. In any case, public lights were beginning to range: brutal searchlights, and the torture-chamber arc lights necessary for television.

Millie tore off her nightdress. She plunged into her jeans and a thick sweater which Uncle Stephen had bought for her at the supply stores where he bought many of his own garments. She had lost her handkerchief and took out a clean one.

For these simple actions the case was cogent enough. But Millie then hesitated. Uncle Stephen had stopped firing, and Millie could but speculate upon the exact reason. She could not possibly bring herself to desert Uncle Stephen, but the thing of which she was most certain was that the two of them could not win. She suspected that Uncle Stephen really knew that as well as she did. So what then?

Cautiously, she re-entered Uncle Stephen's bedroom. The beam of light which now filled it illuminated nothing human or real. In her short absence, the room had been killed.

Millie realised that Uncle Stephen was in difficulties. The gun was refusing to fire, as cars sometimes refuse to start. Uncle Stephen was tinkering with

it, bashing it, cursing it. Soon, in the nature of things, the functionaries would close in finally, nor would it be a concerted attack of the kind which the gun was designed to ward off. It would be more a matter of irresistible infiltration, worked out long before in every detail, standard practice, precluding all possibility of topographical variation.

Millie ascended the attic ladder to the rooftree. 'Uncle Stephen!' she called down to him.

Absorbed though he was in his male task, he looked up at once.

'Go back,' he cried out. 'Go back, little Millie.'

'What's up, Uncle Stephen?' What's gone wrong?' Nothing else was possible than to enter into things as he saw them.

'The boys have won this round, Millie. We must admit that. They've put the gun right out of action.'

'But how, Uncle Stephen?'

'It's some kind of schoolboy muck. They dropped a whole gob of it into the breech. Clever monkeys, we must admit.'

Millie had almost forgotten the boys; incredible though that seemed.

'Where are they now?'

'I'll bet they've made off. They don't have much more to do, just at this moment.'

Millie glanced anxiously round amid the confused and inhuman lights. But she knew that for a second she had almost wished the boys had still been there; as some kind of reassurance against all that was developing.

'I said I was here to protect you,' affirmed Uncle Stephen, 'and I shall do it still. I have always won the last battle. Always and always.'

'Come away with me, Uncle Stephen, while there's time.'

He went through burlesque bristling motions. 'You don't suppose I shall knuckle down to a couple of schoolboys with their pockets full of gum.' He expressed it facetiously, but of course he meant it, could hardly have meant it more.

Now that the firing had ceased for some time, the encircling host had begun to relax. Cups of tea were being consumed; ambulance workers were chatting to firemen on familiar subjects, their respective rates of pay and conditions of employment, their pension prospects, the maladies of their dear ones.

'Oh come on, Uncle Stephen. If the boys have gone, we can go too.'

To her consternation, he was not to be budged. 'No, girl,' he said. 'This is my home, my castle, as we used to say; and perhaps by now it's your home and castle too. Wouldn't you say that's very nearly true, Millie?' He had given up fiddling with the gun, and was addressing himself to something even more important.

'The boys will return,' she said. 'When all the people have gone. And you'll be in endless trouble for firing that gun in any case, even though I know you did it for my sake.'

'All my guns are licensed, Millie. I'm a registered holder of firearms. And as for the boys, let them come. I want nothing better. They've won a battle. They won't win the war. They're hulking brutes, but they're still only schoolboys. Look at this.' Uncle Stephen displayed the mess on his hands and combat suit.

'We shan't feel the same about the house ever again, Uncle Stephen. You must know that.'

'If we were all to let ideas of that kind govern our lives, we'd all be homeless.' Uncle Stephen sat back on the semi-dismantled gun. 'You mustn't suppose, girl, that I don't know what you mean. It's simply that not one thing in life is ever gained by running away. This is our home, yours and mine, and here we stay.'

'I'm afraid of the boys coming back,' said Millie. 'I'm terrified.'

The big lights were being turned out, one after another. It is often noticeable that they are in use only for a few minutes. By now Millie was unsure whether she preferred the crude glare or the deep darkness.

Someone was hammering at the front door. It was of course inevitable, sooner or later. Probably it had been going on at a lesser intensity for some time.

Millie dropped down the attic ladder and flitted through the dark house like a noctambule. She was not going to wait for any nonsense from Uncle Stephen about taking no notice. All the same, at the foot of the stairs she stood and called out. After all, it might conceivably be the boys.

'Who's there?' In the hall, the trophies were shaggy as a tropical forest.

'I'm a police officer, madam. Kindly open the door.'

She knew the voice. She slipped the chain and drew the big bolts in a trice.

'We're old friends, officer.'

All the same, he showed his card, and said, 'Detective-Sergeant Meadowsweet.' Millie smiled. 'May we have some light on the scene, madam?'

'Would that be safe?'

'Safe as could be, madam. The two men have been sighted miles away, and we're closing in steadily.'

'Oh!' gasped Millie. 'So you know?'

'Of course we know, madam. What else did you think we were doing here. Now, I just want you to tell me all that's taken place. After that, I must have a word with the gentleman upstairs who's been treating himself to a little pistol practice.'

'I hope he's not done any damage.'

'No particular damage that we know of, but that's more by luck than judgement, wouldn't you say?'

'He's got all the necessary licences.'

'We know that, madam, but he happens not to have a licence to fire at intruders, because no such licence exists. Jobs of that kind must be left to the police. It sometimes causes hardship, but it's the law, and a gentleman with all those different licences knows better than most what they permit him to do and what not.'

'Perhaps I should say,' put in Millie, 'that the gentleman's my uncle. He kindly took me in after the trouble we had a year ago. A little *more* than a year, actually.'

'I could see at the time that your husband wasn't much help,' said Detective-Sergeant Meadowsweet in his inimitable way; and then duly added, 'If you don't mind my saying so, madam.'

'Oh no, I don't mind,' said Millie. 'Phineas was utterly wet from first to last. The whole thing was the biggest mistake I ever made. Not that "mistake" is quite a strong enough word. But do sit down, Sergeant.'

'I take it,' said the Detective-Sergeant as he did so, 'that the two men were attempting to force an entrance? Tonight, I mean.'

'They're really only boys,' said Millie, 'absurd though it seems.'

'I don't think we need to go over that ground again, madam. If you remember, we covered it fully when Mr. Morke was there. So the two of them were attempting to force an entrance?'

'Well, not exactly, as I have to admit. What happened was simply that I saw one of them out on the lawn and rather lost my head. You know what they look like, Sergeant? How enormous they are?'

'Yes, we know very well, madam. Don't you worry about that. The approved school couldn't hold them for a week. The Tower of London would be more the thing, I'd say. So what happened then?'

'They're so strong too. I admit that I'm frightened to think about it. But of course you know about that too.'

The Sergeant nodded. He had settled himself on a big black stool from somewhere in French West Africa. Millie had been given to understand that, before the French came, the potentate whose official seat it had been (perhaps even throne) had at times waded through blood almost to the knees. She had difficulty in remembering which of the different regions the different things came from; especially as Uncle Stephen had shifted in mid-career from the fairly Far East to Africa, and then back to the East. The legs of the stool were decorated with small projecting bones and teeth, inserted into the woodwork. Above the Detective-Sergeant's head flapped a faded rushwork curtain originally intended, Uncle Stephen had said, to deter the flesh-eating birds and bats from entering one's room during the night.

'So what happened then, madam?'

'I admit that I completely lost my head, and ran in to my uncle, who took steps to defend me. No more than that.'

Another voice broke in. 'I take full responsibility, officer.'

Uncle Stephen had appeared at the top of the stairs. He had changed into his usual sharply pressed trousers and camel-hair jacket. 'The situation was extremely menacing. I was protecting my own flesh and blood against a couple of thugs.'

'Yes, sir, they're a nasty enough pair, according to all the evidence. The police are fed to the teeth with them, I can tell you that.'

'Very good of you to confirm what I say, officer. I am sorry I had to take the law into my own hands, but you'll agree that I had every justification. I've spent most of my life in places where you have to think quickly the whole

time, or you find yourself dead. Worse than dead. May I suggest that we say no more about it? Let me give you a stiff whisky before you go?'

'We're not supposed to drink while we're on duty, sir.'

'Of course not,' said Uncle Stephen. 'I have served with the police myself. In several different parts of the globe.'

A little later, when the three of them were sitting amicably together, Millie began to feel intensely sad.

'I cannot help feeling partially responsible,' she blurted out. 'Do you think, Sergeant, there's anything to be done? Anything, even in theory, that *I* could do? Any possibility?'

At once Uncle Stephen shouted out, 'Clap them in irons, I should hope. Use straitjackets, if necessary. Though you'd have to have them specially made big enough. And then you've got to lay hold of the boys first. Eh, officer? They won the first round against *me*, you know.'

'We'll manage that all right, sir,' replied Detective-Sergeant Meadowsweet. 'The police don't fancy having the mickey taken out of them by two overgrown kids. Which is what you and Mr. Morke both said they were, madam.'

'But what can be done *then*?' persisted Millie, though somewhat against the grain, as she was perfectly well, although confusedly, aware. 'Is there *anything* that I could do?'

'All I am permitted to say is that it will then be a matter for the proper authorities.' The Detective-Sergeant thought for a few seconds and, in his characteristic way, he added, 'I wish them the best of British luck with it.'

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Unfortunately, it soon proved that the Detective-Sergeant had been mistaken at the precise point where he had shown most confidence: his

conviction that Angus and Rodney would be finally apprehended in virtually no time.

A week passed and there was no hint or rumour of an arrest. On the other hand, Uncle Stephen had no further trouble with the authorities. There were questions at the next two Parish Council meetings, but nothing was permitted to come out of them. As for the two young giants themselves, they appeared to have gone into hiding, difficult though that must have been; or perhaps it was that they were passing almost unnoticed amidst the freaks and zanies that people urban and suburban areas in the later part of the twentieth century. Millie, however, remembering the pair, found that hard to believe; and shivered when recollection fell for a while into full focus.

None the less, she had begun to go out once more: shopping, visiting the library, even attending a lecture on Criminology by an Austrian refugee. Uncle Stephen was fiercely opposed to all these excursions, and, to please him (as she would have expressed it to a confidante), she gave two undertakings: that she would never be parted from a tiny gun he lent her; and that for any longer journey she would take his car and not lightly step out of it or turn off the engine. Before she was married, Millie had driven all the time. Uncle Stephen's car was a beautiful old Alvis. Millie loved muffling herself up in order to drive it; and it had the advantage that then she was not easily identifiable. The gun went into the pocket of her jeans, where it was no more noticeable than a compact. It fired special tiny bullets which, as Uncle Stephen confided, were, strictly speaking, illegal: a steady stream of them, if necessary; and it fired them almost silently. Uncle Stephen was at his best when instructing Millie on mid-week mornings in the small orchard.

These things were advances, and Millie had no doubt about how much Uncle Stephen loved and needed her; but the whole thing amounted to little more than a half-life, when all was said and done. Millie had no very precise idea of what the other half might consist in, still less of how best to go after it; but she missed it none the less, as people do. In the end, she decided finally that there was no sensible alternative to a further consultation with Thelma Modelle.

She had, of course, been aware of this for some time, and had continued to dream about Thelma quite frequently, but it meant returning to the other suburb, the suburb where she had lived for years with Phineas and the boys; so that she had hesitated and hesitated. Uncle Stephen would have had a fit if he had known what she was proposing.

Then one morning it became unbearable, as things suddenly do. It was a premonition or other compulsion.

She tied up her hair in a dark-green scarf, donned heavy-duty garments, and tucked in the ends of her knotted, paler green muffler; all without a word to Uncle Stephen except to the effect that she wanted some different air and would very likely die without it. It was not a very gracious thing to say but it was essential to seem adamant.

'Drive fast,' said Uncle Stephen anxiously. 'Never slow down unless you absolutely have to. And be ready for anything.'

She knew by now what that meant.

'Of course, Uncle Stephen,' she said. 'I'll be fine.'

'I ought by rights to come with you, and look after you, but it's not safe to leave the house on its own. You know how it is, Millie.'

'I know.'

'Luckily, I went over the car this morning while you were sleeping. She'll go like the wind. See to it that she does. There's a girl.'

'That's what I'm going to do.' She was tying an *eau-de-Nil* silk scarf round the lower part of her face.

'Goodbye, my sweet.'

Through the tight scarf, Uncle Stephen kissed her lips.

She roared away, but really there was a traffic light round the first bend, and always it was red. Uncle Stephen must have known that even better than

she knew it.

None the less, she had a perfectly authentic disinclination to linger; and as the other suburb came nearer, one of her hands dropped half-consciously from the wheel and rested for longer and longer periods upon the reassuring object in her pocket.

The Parade, once again; the Lavender Bag; the fish shop! The fish shop was now even more diversified in its wares than when she had seen it last: now there was hardly a fish in sight. Millie felt no nostalgia; nothing but nausea.

She brought the Alvis to rest as unobtrusively as possible with such a machine and darted upstairs in her full rig. She had no more made an appointment than on the previous occasion.

But this time the visionary did not greet her upon the landing, and the door of the sanctum, once the rheumatism lady's little sitting room, was shut.

Millie hesitated for some time. After all, she was presumably hidden from observation, and could give a moment or two to thinking and deciding. Most probably, Thelma's practice had grown since those first days, so that by now a client would have to be specially fitted in. Alternatively, Thelma might have failed and gone. Or gone, anyway. Communities are full of neat or braggart labels referring to vanished enterprises.

Millie timidly tapped.

'What is it?' The voice was Thelma's.

How could Millie explain? It was best to open and enter.

Thelma sat on the floor by the rheumatism lady's miniature gas fire. The black table, with its attendant black chairs, had been pushed into a corner. The zodiacal wall cards hung at madder angles than ever. Thelma herself wore what looked like the same green jeans, though they also looked a year and more older; and a battle-dress tunic, dyed dark blue by the authorities. It could be deduced that business was less than brisk.

'Oh, it's you.'

Thelma did not get up, and this time it was Millie who stood.

'Yes, it's me. I want to know what's happening now. Exactly, please. What's happening at this very moment, if possible.'

'Well, in that case you'd better shut the door.'

Millie complied. She perceived that she should have done it in the first place. At least Thelma had not specifically demurred.

'And you'd better take off your clothes.'

'Some of them,' said Millie, smiling.

She had unwound the silk scarf from her face before entering. Now she climbed out of the heavy-duty garments and threw them on the floor, where they lay like prehistoric monsters, alive or dead, as the case might be. The rheumatism lady had presumably arranged to take away her carpets since Millie had last been there, because now the boards were bare. They were also mottled, but that happens soon and mysteriously in almost any house.

'Leave that,' said Thelma sharply, as Millie was about to unwind the dark green scarf which confined her locks.

Millie desisted. Her brow was moist.

'Take off your sweater if you're too hot,' said Thelma.

Millie shook her head.

'This time I shall need your money,' said Thelma. 'You can't depend entirely on my good will. I might need a new dress. Have you thought of that?'

'How much money?' asked Millie, still on her feet.

'How much have you got with you?'

'Can't you see without asking me?'

'Yes,' said Thelma. 'Forty pounds in fivers, and ten single pounds. You must want to know badly.'

'I do,' said Millie calmly. For some reason, Thelma, no matter what her words or deeds, never upset her, as so many people did, even when saying or doing very little. Thelma was like Uncle Stephen in that.

'I'll take forty-nine pounds of it. You may need a pound suddenly when you leave.' Millie had noticed before that Thelma was surprisingly well-spoken in her own way.

'Only if you tell me what I've asked you to tell me and tell me the truth and the whole truth.'

Thelma shot Millie a confusing glance. Though intense, it was not necessarily hostile.

Then she arose from the floor and drew the curtains across the single window. They were not the rheumatism lady's pretty chintz, but heavy, dun, and unshaped. As they were touched and moved, they smelt. It was as if old clothes were being draped before the fairy windows of a wagon.

Thelma locked the door.

'I'm not locking you in. You can leave any time you like.'

And Millie could indeed see that the key was still there.

Thelma lifted the crystal and placed it on the floor. Sure enough, it was much smaller than Millie had always supposed such gadgets to be. Perhaps they came in different sizes, according to the purchaser's needs and resources?

The only light was from under the door and from the small yellow gas fire. The room was odorous as well as stuffy.

Thelma signalised this fact by throwing off her dark-blue tunic. Beneath it she wore a fragile pinkish garment with big rents in it, through which her brown skin could be seen by what light there was. Her mop of hair was uncombed and uneven in length.

'Do what I am doing,' directed Thelma; and added, 'If you really must go on with this.'

When Millie made no answer, Thelma wriggled down on the floor until she lay at full length upon her front with the crystal about two inches before her eyes.

She looked ridiculous; or any other woman in her position would have looked ridiculous. Millie had supposed that crystal-gazing was done seated at a table. Moreover, a very suitable table was in the room with them.

'I advised you to take off your sweater,' said Thelma. 'Why not be more friendly?'

Millie continued calm. Upon the passage to truth, crosscurrents are to be expected.

'I'm all right,' she said, and lay down upon her front on the diametrical other side of the small crystal. She rested her chin upon her two hands, as Thelma was doing. At these close quarters, Thelma's lupine aroma was very pungent. Millie tried to concentrate upon gazing into the crystal. She assumed that to be the right thing to do. If only the crystal had been proportioned for a mature woman instead of for a waif!

But that matter began to adjust itself, and before Millie had had time even to begin feeling physically uncomfortable. As she gazed through the crystal at Thelma's rock-pool eyes, the yellow light from the gas fire turned blue; and the circumference of the crystal expanded and expanded, as did Thelma's orbs on the other side of it. Indeed, Millie realised quite clearly that it must always have been impossible for her to have seen Thelma's eyes *through* the actual crystal. All anyone could really have seen *through* it, would have been Thelma's nose and a small distance on either side of it.

Incandescent with darting blue lights, the crystal grew until it filled the room, until it *was* the room, and Thelma's eyes were no longer there, as if her face had split vertically down the middle and her eyes had rolled away round the polished sphere, each in a different direction.

But by now Millie was in a room no longer. Nor was she lying inconveniently upon her front. On the contrary, she was in a small woodland clearing and was observing with perfect ease what therein transpired.

The two boys were sitting, rather absurdly jammed together, on a tree trunk. It was not a whole fallen giant of the forest, but a neatly sawn-off section, awaiting the arrival of the timber float and its tractor, or perhaps left there by intention as a nature seat for wooers, an accessory to picnics. In fact, the boys, ravenous as ever, were at that moment engaged upon a picnic of their own.

Each boy held in his hand a very large, very red bone, from which he was gnawing in the frenzied manner that Millie remembered so well.

On the worn, wintry grass before them lay what was left of a human body.

The boys had already eaten their way through most of it, so that it could not even be described as a skeleton or semi-skeleton. The disjoined bones were everywhere strewn about at random, and only the top part of the frame, the upper ribs, remained in position, together with the half-eaten head.

It was Phineas's head.

Things swam.

Millie felt that her soul was rushing up a shaft at the centre of her body. She knew that this is what it was to die.

But she did not die.

She realised that now she was lying on her back in the still-darkened room. Thelma must have moved her. The gas fire was as yellow as before, no

doubt because there was something wrong with it; and Thelma in her pink rags and dirty jeans was standing before her, even looking down at her.

'You've been out a long time.'

'I wish I were still out.'

'*You* may, but I don't. I've things to do. You forget that.'

Millie hesitated.

'Did you see them too?'

'Of course I saw them. Remember, I asked you whether you really had to go on with it.'

'What else could I do?'

'I don't know. I'm not your nursemaid.'

Millie sat up. 'If you pass me my handbag, I'll pay you.'

Thelma passed it. It did not seem to have been rifled during Millie's anaesthesia.

'Perhaps we could have a little more light?' suggested Millie.

Thelma threw on her tunic and, without fastening it, began to draw back or take down the window coverings. Millie did not examine which it was.

She rose to her feet. Had Thelma been behaving differently, she, Millie, would have been shaking all over, still prostrate. She seated herself on one of the dusty black chairs. She counted out forty-nine pounds on to the black table in the corner. Then she gazed for a moment straight into Thelma's vatic eyes. At once the sensations of a few moments before (or of what seemed a few moments) faintly recurred. Millie felt dragged out of herself, and turned her face to the dingy wall.

'You can stay if you wish. You know that.' Thelma made no attempt to take up the money; though Millie could be in small doubt that the sum would make a big difference for Thelma, at least temporarily.

'You can't expect me to keep open house for you always.'

Millie turned a little and, without again looking at Thelma, attempted a smile of some kind.

'I shan't be around much longer,' said Thelma. "Surely you can see that?'

Millie stood up. 'Where will you go?'

'I shall go back to decent people. I should never have left them.'

'What made you?'

'I killed a girl.'

'I see.'

'I did right.'

There was a pause: a need (perhaps on both sides) for inner regrouping. It was a metaphor that Uncle Stephen might have approved.

Millie gathered herself together. 'Is that the sort of thing *I* ought to do?'

'How can I tell? Why ask *me*? You must decide for yourself.'

Millie gathered herself together a second time. It was difficult to petition. The forty-nine pounds still lay untouched on the hocus-pocus table. 'You *can* tell, Thelma. I know you can. They're obscene, monstrous, all those words. You know as well as I do. You're the only one who does. I feel responsible for them. Is that what I ought to do? Tell me.'

Thelma seemed actually to reflect for a moment; instead of darting out a reply like the double tongue of a snake, the flick of a boxing second's towel, as she usually did.

'You're not the kind,' said Thelma. 'It would be beyond you.'

'Then what? Help me, Thelma. Please, please help me.'

'I told you before. Run away.'

Millie stared blankly at the entire, round, empty, world.

'Be more friendly and you can lie up with *me*. I keep saying so. But soon I shan't be here. I have debts.'

Millie wondered with what currency Thelma proposed to settle.

'Hurry up and put the money away somewhere,' Millie said.

But Thelma again spoke to the point: 'I'll place my right hand on your heart and you'll place your on mine. Then we'll be friends.'

Millie glanced at Thelma's ragged pink garment, but all she said was, 'It wouldn't be fair.' Then she added, 'Thank you all the same.' What a depraved, common way to express gratitude, she thought.

There was a tapping at the locked door.

'Who's that?' asked Millie, as if she really did live there.

Thelma had leapt upon the money like a cheetah and shoved it hugger-mugger into her jeans.

'It's Agnes Waterfield. She comes every day at this hour.'

'God! I don't want to meet *her*,' cried Millie.

'Well, you'll have to,' said Thelma, and unlocked the door on the instant.

Millie could only snatch her garments and scuttle away like a cat, hoping that Agnes might be too involved in her own troubles and preoccupations to recognise her, though not really believing it.

Outside, it had begun to snow. The big open car was spattered with separate flakes.

*

Millie sped away. Soon the suburb which had once been home was miles behind.

The straggling and diminishing woodlands touched the road at several places before one reached the main section in which lay Uncle Stephen's house. The ground was hummocky here, and nowadays the road ran through several small cuttings, ten or twelve feet high, in order to maintain a more or less constant level for the big lorries, and to give the tearaway tourists an illusion for a minute or two that they were traversing the Rocky Mountains. There were even bends in the road which had not yet been straightened, and all the trees in sight were conifers.

Thinking only of sanctuary, Millie tore round one of these bends (much too fast, but almost everyone did it, and few with Millie's excellent reason); and there were the two boys blocking the way, tall as Fiona Macleod's lordly ones, muscular as Gogmagog, rising high above the puny banks of earth. It was a busy road and they could only a moment before have dropped down into it. Beneath the snow patches on their clothing, Millie could clearly see the splashes of blood from their previous escapade. The boys were so placed that Millie had to stop.

'Got any grub, Mum?'

Quite truthfully, she could no longer tell one twin from the other.

'That's all we ask, Mum,' said the other twin. 'We're hungry.'

'We don't want to outgrow our strength,' said the first twin, just as in the old days.

'Let's search,' cried the second twin. Forbearance was extinguished by appetite.

The two boys were now on the same side of the car.

Millie, who had never seen herself as a glamorous mistress of the wheel, managed something that even Uncle Stephen might have been proud of in the old, dead days at Brooklands. She wrenched the car round on to the other side of the highway, somehow evaded the towering French truck charging towards her, swept back to her proper lane and was fast on her way.

But there was such a scream, perhaps two such screams, that, despite herself, she once more drew up.

She looked back.

The snow was falling faster now; even beginning to lie on the car floor. She was two or three hundred yards from the accident. What accident? She had to find out. It would be better to drive back rather than to walk: even in the modern world, the authorities would not yet have had time to appear and close the road. Again Millie wheeled.

The two vast figures lay crushed on the highway. They had been standing locked together gazing after her, after the car in which there might have been sweets or biscuits; so that in death, as in life, they were not divided. They had been killed by a police vehicle: naturally one of the heavier models. Millie had under-estimated the instancy of modernity. The thing stood there, bluely lighted and roaring.

'It was you we were after, miss,' remarked the police officer, as soon as Millie came once more to a standstill. All the police were ignoring the snow completely. 'You were speeding. And now look what's happened.'

'If you ask Detective-Sergeant Meadowsweet, he will explain to you why I was going fast.' Millie shivered. 'I have to go fast.'

'We shall make enquiries, but no individual officer is empowered to authorise a breach of the law.'

By the time the usual particulars had been given and taken, the ambulance had arrived, screaming and flashing with determination; but it was proving impossible to insert the two huge bodies into it. The men were doing all they could, and the police had surrounded the area with neat little objects, like bright toys; but anyone not immediately involved could see that the task was hopeless.

The snow was falling more heavily every minute, so that by the time Millie was once more left alone among the traffic surging round the frail barrier, the two boys were looking like the last scene in *Babes in the Wood*, except that the babes had changed places, and changed roles, with the giants.

Hand In Glove (1979)

...that subtle gauzy haze which one only finds in Essex.

— Sir Henry Channon

When Millicent finally broke it off with Nigel and felt that the last tiny bit of meaning had ebbed from her life (apart, of course, from her job), it was natural that Winifred should suggest a picnic, combined with a visit, "not too serious," as Winifred put it, to a Great House. Millicent realized that there was no alternative to clutching at the idea and vouchsafed quite effectively the expected blend of pallor and gratitude. She was likely to see much more of Winifred in the future, provided always that Winifred did not somehow choose this precise moment to dart off in some new direction.

Everyone knew about Millicent and Nigel and took it for granted, so that now she was peacefully alotted an odd day or two off, despite the importance of what she did. After all, she had been linked with Nigel, in one way or another, for a long time; and the deceptively small gradations between the different ways were the business only of the two parties. Winifred, on the other hand, had quite a struggle to escape, but she persisted because she realized how much it must matter to Millicent. There are too many people about to make it sensible to assess most kinds of employment objectively. In one important respect, Winifred's life was simpler than Millicent's: "I have never been in love," she would say. "I really don't understand about it." Indeed, the matter arose but rarely, and less often now than ten or twelve years ago.

"What about Baddeley End?" suggested Winifred, attempting a black joke, inducing the ghost of a smile. Winifred had seldom supposed that the Nigel business would end other than as it had.

"Perfect," said Millicent, entering into the spirit, extending phantom hands in gratitude.

"I'll look on the map for a picnic spot," said Winifred. Winifred had found picnic spots for them in the Cevennes, the Apennines, the Dolomites, the Sierra de Guadarrama, even the Carpathians. Incidentally, it was exactly the kind of thing at which Nigel was rather hopeless. Encountering Nigel, one seldom forgot the bull and the gate.

"We'd better use my car," continued Winifred. "Then you'll only have to do what you want to do."

And at first, upon the face of it, things had all gone charmingly as always. Millicent could be in no doubt of that. It is difficult at these times to know which to prefer: friends who understand (up to a point) or those who do not understand at all and thus offer their own kind of momentary escape.

Winifred brought the car to a stand at the end of a long lane, perhaps even bridle path, imperfectly surfaced, at least for modern traffic, even though they were no further from their respective flats than somewhere in Essex. She had been carrying a great part of their route in her head. Now she was envisaging the picnic site.

"It's a rather pretty spot," she said with confidence. "There's a right of way, or at least a footpath, through the churchyard and down to the river."

"What river is it?" enquired Millicent idly.

"It's only a stream. Well, perhaps a little more than that. It's called the Waste."

"Is it really?"

"Yes, it is. Can you please hand me out the rucksack?"

In hours of freedom, Winifred always packed things into a rucksack, where earlier generations would have prepared a luncheon basket or a cabin trunk.

"I'm sorry I've made no contribution," said Millicent, not for the first time.

"Don't be foolish," said Winifred.

"At least let me carry something?"

"All right, the half bottle and the glasses. I couldn't get them in."

"How sweet of you," said Millicent. Potation was normally eschewed in the middle of the day.

"I imagine we go through the kissing gate."

From even that accepted locution Millicent slightly shrank.

The iron kissing gate stood beside the wooden lich gate, opened only on specific occasions.

With the ancient church on their right, little, low, and lichened, they descended the track between the graves. The path had at one time been paved with bricks, but many of the bricks were now missing, and weeds grew between the others.

"It's very slippery," said Millicent. "I shouldn't like to have to hurry back up." It was appropriate that she should make a remark of some kind, should show that she was still alive.

"It can't really be slippery. It hasn't rained for weeks."

Millicent had to admit the truth of that.

"Perhaps it would be better if I were to go first?" continued Winifred. "Then you could take your time with the glasses. Sorry they're so fragile."

"You know where we're going," responded Millicent, falling into second place.

"We'll look inside the church before we leave."

Though ivy had begun to entangle the mossy little church like a stealthily encroaching octopus, Millicent had to admit that the considerable number of apparently new graves suggested the continuing usefulness of the building. On the other hand, the plastered rectory or vicarage to their left,

behind the dangerous-looking hedge, was stained and grimed, and with no visible open window on this almost ideal day.

Whatever Winifred might say, the churchyard seemed very moist. But then much of Essex is heavy clay. Everyone in the world knows that.

At the far end was another kissing gate, very creaky and arbitrary, and, beyond, a big, green, sloping field. There were cows drawn together in the far, upper corner: "a mixed lot of animals," as Millicent's stepfather would have put it in the old days—the very old days they seemed at that moment.

Down the emerald field ran no visible track, but Winifred, with the dotted map in the forefront of her mind, pursued a steady course. Millicent knew from experience that at the bottom of Winifred's rucksack was a spacious ground- sheet. It seemed just as well.

Winifred led the way through an almost nonexistent gate to the left and along a curious muddy passage between rank hedges down to the brink of the river.

Here there were small islands of banked mud with tall plants growing on them that looked almost tropical, and, to the right, a crumbling stone bridge, with an ornament of some kind upon the central panel. Rich, heavy foliage shaded the scene, but early dragonflies glinted across vague streaks of sunlight.

"The right of way goes over the bridge," remarked Winifred, "but we might do better on this side."

Sedgy and umbrous, the picnic spot was romantic in the extreme; most unlikely of discovery even at so short a distance from the human hive, from their own north side of the Park. After the repast, one might well seek the brittle bones of once-loitering knights; or one might aforetime have done that, when one had the energy and the faith. Besides, Millicent had noticed that the bridge was obstructed from end to end by rusty barbed wire, with long spikes, mostly bent.

In repose on the groundsheet, they were a handsome pair: trim; effective; still, despite everything, expectant. They wore sweaters in plain colors and stained, familiar trousers. In the symphony of Milli- cent's abundant hair were themes of pale grey. Winifred's stout tow was at all times sturdily neutral. A poet lingering upon the bridge might have felt sad that life had offered them no more. Few people can pick out, merely from the lines on a map, so ideal a region for a friend's grief. Few people can look so sensuous in sadness as Millicent, away from the office, momentarily oblivious to its ambiguous, paranoid satisfactions.

It had indeed been resourceful of Winifred to buy and bring the half bottle, but Millicent found that the noontide wine made no difference. How could it? How could anything? Almost anything?

But then —

"Winifred! Where have all these mushrooms come from?"

"I expect they were there when we arrived."

"I'm quite certain they were not."

"Of course they were," said Winifred. "Mushrooms grow fast but not that fast."

"They were not. I shouldn't have sat down if they had been. I don't like sitting among a lot of giant mushrooms."

"They're quite the normal size," said Winifred, smiling and drawing up her legs. "Would you like to go?"

"Well, we have finished the picnic," said Millicent. "Thanks very much. Winifred, it was lovely."

They rose: two exiled dryads, the poet on the bridge might have said. On their side on the shallow, marshy, wandering river were mushrooms as far as the eye could see, downstream and up, though it was true that in neither

direction could the eye see very far along the bank, being impeded one way by the bridge and the other by the near-jungle.

"It"s the damp," said Millicent. "Everything is so terribly damp."

"If it is," said Winifred, "it must be always like it, because there's been very little rain. I said that before."

Millicent felt ashamed of herself, as happened the whole time now. "It was very clever of you to find such a perfect place," she said immediately. "But you always do. Everything was absolutely for the best until the mushrooms came." "I'm not really sure that they are mushrooms," said Winifred. "Perhaps merely fungi."

"Let's not put it to the test," said Millicent. "Let's go. Oh, I'm so sorry. You haven't finished repacking."

Duly, the ascent was far more laborious. "Tacky" was the word that Millicent's stepfather would have applied to the going.

"Why do all the cows stay clustered in one corner?" asked Millicent. "They haven't moved one leg since we arrived."

"It's to do with the flies," said Winifred knowledgeably.

"They're not waving their tails about. They're not tossing their heads. They're not lowing. In fact, they might be stuffed or modeled." "I expect they're chewing the cud, Millicent."

"I don't think they are." Millicent of course really knew more of country matters than Winifred.

"I'm not sure they're there at all," said Millicent.

"Oh, hang on, Millicent," said Winifred, without, however, ceasing to plod and without even looking back at Millicent over her shoulder, let alone at the distant cows.

Millicent knew that people were being kind to her and that it was an unsuitable moment for her to make even the smallest fuss, except perhaps a fun-fuss, flattering to the other party.

They reached the wilful kissing gate at the bottom of the churchyard. It made its noise as soon as it was even touched and clanged back spitefully at Millicent when Winifred had passed safely through it.

Millicent had not remembered the gate's behavior on their outward trip. Probably one tackled things differently according to whether one was descending or ascending.

But —

"Winifred, look!"

Millicent, so carefully self-contained the entire day, had all but screamed.

"None of that was there just now."

She could not raise her arm to point. Ahead of them, to the left of the ascending craggy path through the churchyard, was a pile of wreaths and sprays, harps wrought from lilies, red roses twisted into hearts, irises concocted into archangel trumpets. Commerce and the commemorative instinct could hardly collaborate further.

"You didn't notice it," replied

Winifred uopn the instant. She even added, as at another time that day she certainly would not have done, "Your mind was on other things." She then looked over her shoulder at Millicent and smiled.

"They weren't there," said Millicent, more sure of her facts than of herself. "There's been a funeral while we were by the river."

"I think we'd have heard something," replied Winifred, still smiling. "Besides you don't bury people in the lunch hour."

"Well, something's happened."

"Last time you just didn't notice," replied Winifred, turning away and looking ahead of her at the weedy path. "That's all."

The challenge was too much for Millicent's resolutions of mousiness. "Well, did you?" she enquired.

But Winifred had prepared herself. "I'm not sure whether I did or didn't, Millicent. Does it matter?"

Winifred took several steps forward and then asked, "Would you rather give the church a miss?"

"Not at all," replied Millicent. "Inside there might be an explanation of some kind."

Millicent was glad she was in the rear, because at first she had difficulty in passing the banked-up tributes. They all looked so terribly new. The oblong mound beneath them was concealed, but one could scarcely doubt that it was there. At first, the flowers seemed to smell as if they were unforced and freshly picked, not like proper funerary flowers at all, which either smell not, or smell merely of accepted mortality. But then, on second thoughts, or at a second intake of Millicent's breath, the smell was not exactly as of garden or even of hedgerow flowers either. After a few seconds, the smell seemed as unaccountable as the sudden apparition of the flowers themselves. Certainly it was not in the least a smell that Millicent would have expected or could ever much care for.

She noticed that Winifred was stumping along, still looking at the battered bricks beneath her feet.

Millicent hesitated. "Perhaps we ought to inspect some of the cards?" she suggested.

That must have been a mischievous idea because this time Winifred just walked on in silence. And, as a matter of fact, Millicent had to admit to herself that she could in any case see no cards attached to the flowers, and whatever else might be attached to them.

Winifred walked silently ahead of Millicent right up to the church porch. As she entered it, a sudden bird flopped out just above her head and straight into Millicent's face.

"That's an owl," said Millicent. "We've woken him up."

She almost expected Winifred to say that for owls it was the wrong time of day, or the wrong weather, or the close season; but Winifred was, in fact, simply staring at the wooden church door.

"Won't it open?" enquired Millicent.

"I don't really know. I can see no handle."

The awakened owl had begun to hoot mournfully, which Millicent fancied really was a little odd of it in the early afternoon.

Millicent in turn stared at the door.

"There's nothing at all."

"Not even a keyhole that we can look through," said Winifred.

"I suppose the church has simply been closed and boarded up." "I'm not sure," said Winifred. "It looks like the original door to me. Old as old, wouldn't you say? Built like that. With no proper admittance offered."

Gazing at the door, Millicent could certainly see what Winifred meant. There were no church notices either, no local address of the Samaritans, no lists of ladies to do things.

"Let's see if we can peep in through a window," proposed Winifred.

"I shouldn't think we could. It's usually pretty difficult."

"That's because there are usually lookers-on to cramp one's style. We may find it easier here."

When they emerged from the porch, Millicent surmised that there were now two owls hooting, two at least. However, the once- bright day was losing its luster, becoming middle-aged and overcast.

"God, it's muggy," said Millicent.

"I expect there's rain on the way. You know we could do with it."

"Yes, but not here, not now."

Winifred was squeezing the tips of her shoes and her feet into places where the mortar had fallen out of the church wall, and sometimes even whole flints. She was adhering to ledges and small projections. She was forcing herself upwards in the attempt to look first through one window and then, upon failing and falling, through another. "I simply can't imagine what it can look like inside," she said.

They always did things thoroughly and properly, whatever the things were, but it was not a day in her life when Millicent felt like any kind of emulation. Moreover, she did not see how she could even give assistance to Winifred. They were no longer two schoolgirls, one able to hoist up the other as easily as Santa Claus' sack.

Unavailingly, Winifred had essayed two windows on the south side of the nave and one on the south side of the chancel, which three offered clear glass, however smudgy. In the two remaining windows on that side of the church, the glass was painted, and so it was with the east window. Winifred went round to the north side, with Millicent following. Here the sun did not fall, and it seemed to Millicent that the moping owls had eased off. En route the churchyard grasses had been rank and razory.

But here the masonry was further gone in decomposition, and Winifred could jump up quite readily at the first attempt.

For a surprisingly long time, or so it seemed, Winifred stared in through the easternmost window on the northern side of the nave, but speaking no word. Here many of the small panes were missing. Indeed, one pane fell into the church from somewhere with a small, sharp clatter even while

Winifred was still gazing and Millicent still standing. The whole structure was in a state of molder.

At her own rather long last, Winifred descended stiffly.

She began trying to remove the aged, clinging rubble from the knees of her trousers, but the dust was damp too, on this side of the church particularly damp.

"Want to have a look?" Winifred asked.

"What is there to see?"

"Nothing in particular." Winifred was rubbing away, though al most certainly making matters worse. "Really, nothing. I shouldn't bother."

"Then I won't," said Millicent. "You look like a pilgrim: more on her knees than on her back, or whatever it is."

"Most of the things have been taken away," continued Winifred informatively.

"In that case, where did the funeral happen? Where did they hold the service?"

Winifred went on fiddling with her trousers for a moment before attempting a reply. "Somewhere else, I suppose. That's quite common nowadays."

"There's something wrong," said Millicent. "There's something very wrong with almost everything."

They ploughed back through the coarse grass to the brick path up to the porch. The owls seemed indeed to have retired once more to their carnivorous bothies.

"We must get on with things or we shall miss Baddeley," said Winifred. "Not that it hasn't all been well worth while, as I hope you will agree."

But —

On the path, straight before them, between the church porch and the other, by now almost familiar path which ran across the descending graveyard, right in the center of things, lay a glove.

"That wasn't there either," said Millicent immediately.

Winifred picked up the glove and they inspected it together. It was a left-hand glove in black leather or kid, seemingly new or almost so, and really rather elegant. It would have been a remarkably small left hand that fitted it, Millicent thought. People occasionally remarked upon the smallness of her own hands, which was always something that pleased her. The tiny but expensive-looking body of the glove terminated in a wider gauntlet-like frill or extension of rougher design.

"We'd better hand it in," said Winifred.

"Where?"

"At the rectory, I suppose, if that is what the place is."

"Do you think we must?"

"Well, what else? We can't go off with it. It looks costly."

"There's someone else around the place," said Millicent. "Perhaps more than one of them." She could not quite have said why she thought there might be such a crowd.

But Winifred again remained silent and did not ask why.

"I'll carry the glove," said Millicent. Winifred was still bearing the rucksack and its remaining contents, including the empty half bottle, for which the graveyard offered no litter basket.

* * *

The carriage gate, which had once been painted in some kind of blue and was now falling apart, crossbar from socket, and spike- work from woodwork, offered no clue as to whether the abode was, or had been,

rectory or vicarage. The short drive was weedy and littered. Either the trees predated the mid- Victorian building, or they were prematurely senile.

The front-door bell rang quite sharply when Winifred pushed it, but nothing followed. After a long- ish, silent pause, with Millicent holding the glove to the fore, Winifred rang again. Again, nothing followed.

Millicent spoke: "I believe it's open."

She pushed and together they entered, merely a few steps. The hall within, which had originally been designed more or less in the Gothic manner, was furnished, though not abundantly, and seemed to be "lived in." Coming towards them, moreover, was a bent figure, female, hirsute, and wearing a discolored apron, depending vaguely.

"We found this in the churchyard," said Winifred in her clear voice, pointing to the glove.

"I can't hear the bell," said the figure. "That's why the door's left open. I lost my hearing. You know how."

Millicent knew that Winifred was no good with the deaf: so often a matter not of decibels, but presumably of psychology.

"We found this glove," she said, holding it up and speaking quite naturally.

"I can't hear anything," said the figure, disappointingly. "You know why."

"We don't," said Millicent. "Why?"

But of course that could not be heard either. It was no good trying further.

The retainer, if such she was, saved the situation. "I'll go for madam," she said and withdrew without inviting them to seat themselves on one of the haphazard sofas or uncertain-looking chairs.

"I suppose we shut the door," said Winifred, and did so.

They stood about for a little. There was nothing to look at apart from a single colored print of lambs in the Holy Land. At each corner of the frame, the fretwork made a cross, though one of the crosses had been partly broken off.

"None the less, I don't think it's still the rectory," said Winifred. "Or the vicarage."

"You're right." A middle-aged woman had appeared, wearing a loose dress. The color of the dress lay between oatmeal and cream, and round the oblong neck and the ends of the elbow-length sleeves ran wide strips of a cherry hue. The woman's shoes were faded, and she had taken little trouble with her bird's nest hair. "You're perfectly right," said the woman. "Hasn't been a clergyman here for years. There are some funny old rectories in this county, as you may have heard."

"Boreley, you mean," said Millicent, who had always been quite interested in such things.

"That place and a number of other places," said the woman. "Each little community has its specialty."

"This was a rectory," Winifred enquired in the way she often did, politely elevating her eyebrows, "not a vicarage?"

"They would have found it even more difficult to keep a vicar," said the woman in the most matter-of- fact way. Millicent could see there was no wedding ring on her hand. Indeed, there was no ring of any kind on either of her rather massive, rather unshaped hands. For that matter, there were no gems in her ears, no geegaws round her neck, no Castilian combs in her wild hair.

"Sit down," said the woman. "What can I do for you? My name's Stock. Pansy Stock. Ridiculous, isn't it? But it's a perfectly common name in Essex."

Winifred often went on in that very same way about "Essex," had indeed already done so more than once during the journey down, but Millicent had

always supposed it to be one of Winifred's mild fancies, which it was up to her friends to indulge. She had never supposed it to have any objective metaphysic. Nor had she ever brought herself to address anyone as Pansy and was glad that the need was unlikely to arise now.

They sat, and because it seemed to be called for, Winifred introduced herself and then Millicent. Miss Stock sat upon the other sofa. She was wearing woolly, midgreen stockings.

"It's simply about this glove," went on Winifred. "We explained to your servant, but we couldn't quite make her understand."

"Lettice has heard nothing since it happened. That was the effect it had on her."

"Since what happened?" asked Winifred. "If we may ask, that is."

"Since she was jilted, of course," answered Miss Stock.

"That sounds very sad," said Winifred, in her affable and emollient way. Millicent, after all, had not exactly been jilted, not exactly. Technically, it was she who was the jilt. Socially, it still made a difference.

"It's the usual thing in this place. I've said that each community has its specialty. This is ours."

"How extraordinary!" said Winifred.

"It happens to all the females, and not only when they're still girls."

"I wonder they remain," responded Winifred smilingly.

"They don't remain. They come back."

"In what way?" asked Winifred.

"In what is known as spirit form," said Miss Stock.

Winifred considered. She was perfectly accustomed to claims of that kind, to the many sorts it takes to make a world.

"Like the Willis in Giselle?" she enquired helpfully.

"I believe so," said Miss Stock. 'I've never been inside a theater. I was brought up not to go, and I've never seen any good reason for breaking the rule."

"It's become so expensive too," said Winifred, if only because it was what she would have said in other, doubtless more conventional circumstances.

"This glove," interrupted Millicent, actually dropping it on the floor because she had no wish to hold it any longer. "We saw it lying by itself on the churchyard path."

"I daresay you did," said Miss Stock. "It's not the only thing that's been seen lying in and around the churchyard."

Winifred politely picked up the glove, rose, and placed it on Miss Stock's sofa. "We thought we should hand it in locally."

"That's good of you," said Miss Stock. "Though no one will claim it. There's a room half full of things like it. Trinkets, knicknacks, great gold hearts the size of oysters, souvenirs of all kinds, even a pair of riding boots. Things seem to appear and disappear just as they please. No one ever enquires again for them. That's not why the females come back. Of course it was a kind action on your part. Sometimes people benefit, I suppose. They say that if one finds something, or sees something, one will come back anyway." Miss Stock paused for half a second. Then she asked casually, "Which of you was it?"

At once Millicent replied, "It was I who saw the glove first, and several other things too."

"Then you'd better take the greatest possible care," said Miss Stock, still quite lightly. "Avoid all entanglements of the heart, or you may end like Lettice."

Winifred, who was still on her feet, said, "Millicent, we really must go, or we shall never get to Baddeley End."

Miss Stock said at once, "Baddeley End is closed all day on Thursdays. So wherever else you go, there's no point in going there. "

"You're right about Thursdays, Miss Stock," said Winifred, "because I looked it up most carefully in the book before we left. But this is Wednesday."

"It's not," said Millicent. "It's Thursday."

"Whatever else it may be," confirmed Miss Stock, "it indubitably is Thursday."

There was an embarrassing blank in time, while an angel flitted through the room, or perhaps a demon.

"I now realize that it is Thursday," said Winifred. She turned pale. "Millicent, I am sorry. I must be going mad."

"Of course there are many, many other places you can visit," said Miss Stock. "Endless places. Almost every little hamlet has something of its own to offer." "Yes," said Winifred. "We must have a look round."

"What, then, do they come back for," asked Millicent, interrupting again, "if it's not for their property?"

"I didn't say it wasn't for their property. It depends what property. Not for their gloves or their rings or their little false thises and thats, but for their property, none the less. For what they regard as their property, anyway. One's broken heart, if it can be mended at all, can be mended only in one way."

"And yet at times," said Millicent,"the whole thing seems so trivial, so unreal. So absurd, even. Never really there at all. Utterly not worth the melodrama."

"Indubitably," said Miss Stock. "And the same is true of religious faith, or poetry, of a walk round a lake, of existence itself."

"I suppose so," said Millicent. "But personal feeling is quite particularly—" She could not find the word.

"Millicent," said Winifred. "Let's go." She seemed past conventions with their hostess. She looked white and upset. "We've got rid of the glove. Let's go."

"Tell me," said Millicent. "What is the one way to mend a broken heart? If we are to take the matter so seriously, we need to be told."

"Millicent," said Winifred, "I'll wait for you in the car. At the end of the drive, you remember."

"I'm flattered that you call it a drive," said Miss Stock.

Winifred opened the front door and walked out. The door flopped slowly back behind her.

"Tell me," said Millicent. "What is the one way to mend a broken heart?" She spoke as if in capital letters.

"You know what it is," said Miss Stock. "It is to kill the man who has broken it. Or at least to see to it that he dies."

"Yes, I imagined it was that," said Millicent. Her eyes were on the Palestinian lamblets.

"It is the sole possible test of whether the feeling is real," explained Miss Stock, as if she were a senior demonstrator.

"Or was real?"

"There can be no was. if the feeling's real."

Millicent withdrew her gaze from the gamboling livestock. "And have you yourself taken the necessary steps? If you don't mind my asking, of

course?"

"No. The matter has never arisen in my case. I live here and I look on."

"It doesn't seem a very jolly place to live."

"It's a very instructive place to live. Very cautionary. I profit greatly."

Millicent again paused for a moment, staring across the sparsely endowed room at Miss Stock in her alarming clothes.

"What, Miss Stock, would be your final words of guidance?"

"The matter is probably out of your hands by now, let alone of mine."

Millicent could not bring herself to leave it at that.

"Do girls—women—come here from outside the village? If there really is a village? My friend and I haven't' seen one and the church appears to be disused. It seems to have been disused for a very long time."

"Of course there's a village." said Miss Stock, quite fiercely.

"And the church is not entirely disused, I assure you. And there are cows and a place where they are kept; and a river and a bridge. All the normal things, in fact, though, in each case, with a local emphasis, as is only right and proper. And, yes, females frequently come from outside the village. They find themselves here, often before they know it. Or so I take it to be." Millicent rose.

"Thank you. Miss Stock, for bearing with us and for taking in our glove."

"Perhaps something of your own will be brought to me one day," remarked Miss Stock.

"Who knows?" replied Millicent, entering into the spirit, as she regularly tried to do.

Millicent detected a yellow collecting box on a broken table to the right of the front door. In large black letters a label proclaimed JOSEPHINE BUTLER AID FOR UNFORTUNATES. From her trousers pocket Millicent extracted a contribution. She was glad she did not have to grope ridiculously through a handbag while Miss Stock smiled and waited.

Miss Stock had risen to her feet but had not advanced to see Millicent out. She merely stood there, a little dimly.

"Good-by, Miss Stock."

In the front door, as with many rectories and vicarages, there were two large panes of glass, frosted overall but patterned en clair round the edge, so that in places one could narrowly see through to the outer world. About to pull the door open, which Winifred had left unlatched, Millicent apprehended the shape of a substantial entity standing noiselessly without. It was simply one thing too many. For a second time that day, Millicent found it difficult not to scream. But Miss Stock was in the mistiness behind her, and Millicent drew the door open.

"Nigel, my God!"

Millicent managed to pull fast the door behind her. Then his arms enveloped her, as ivy was enveloping the little church.

"I'm having nothing more to do with you. How did you know I was here?"

"Winifred told me, of course."

"I don't believe you. She's sitting in her car anyway, just by the gate. I'll ask her."

"She's not," said Nigel. "She's left."

"She can't have left. She was waiting for me. Please let me go, Nigel."

"I'll let you go, and then you can see for yourself."

They walked side by side in silence down the depressing, weedy drive. Millicent wondered whether Miss Stock was watching them through the narrow, distorting streaks of machine-cut glass.

There was no Winifred and no car. Thick brown leaves were strewn over the place where the car had stood. It seemed to Millicent for a moment as if the car had been buried there.

"Never mind, my dear. If you behave yourself, I'll drive you home."

"I can't see your car either." It was a notably inadequate rejoinder, but at least spontaneous.

"Naturally not. It's hidden." "Why is it hidden?"

"Because I don't want you careering off in it and leaving me behind. You've tried to ditch me once, and once is enough for any human being."

"I didn't try to ditch you, Nigel. I completed the job. You were smashing up my entire life."

"Not your life, sweet. Only your idiot career, so-called."

"Not only."

"Albeit, I shan't leave you to walk home."

"Not home. Only to the station. I know precisely where it is. Winifred pointed it out. She saw it on the map. She said there are still trains."

"You really can't rely on Winifred."

Millicent knew that this was a lie. Whatever had happened to Winifred, Nigel was lying. Almost everything he said was a lie, more or less. Years ago it had been among the criteria by which she had realized how deeply and truly she loved him.

"You can't always rely on maps either," said Nigel.

"What's happened to Winifred?" How absurd and schoolgirl-ish she always seemed in her own eyes when trying to reach anything like equal terms with Nigel! The silly words leapt to her lips without her choosing or willing them.

"She's gone. Let's do a little sightseeing before we drive home. You can tell me about the crockets and finials. It will help to calm us down."

Again he put his arm tightly round her and, despite her halfsimulated resistance, pushed and pulled her through the kissing gate into the churchyard. Her resistance was half-simulated because she knew from experience how useless with Nigel was anything more. He knew all the tricks by which at school big boys pinion and compel small ones, and he had never hesitated to use them against Millicent, normally, of course, upon a more or less agreed basis of high spirits, good fun, and knowing better than she what it would be sensible for them to do next. His frequent use of real and serious physical force had been another thing that had attracted her.

He dragged her down the uneven path. "Beautiful place. Peaceful. Silent as the grave."

And, indeed, it was quiet now, singularly different in small ways from when Millicent had been there with Winifred. Not only the owls but all the hedgerow birds had ceased to utter. One could not even detect an approaching aircraft. The breeze had dropped, and all the long grass looked dead or painted.

"Tell me about the architecture." said Nigel. "Tell me what to look at."

"The church is shut," said Millicent. "It's been closed for years."

"Then it shouldn't be," said Nigel. "Churches aren't meant to be shut. We'll have to see."

He propelled her up the path where earlier she had first seen the glove. The hand that belonged to it must be very nearly the hand of a child: Millicent realized that now.

In the porch, Nigel sat her down upon the single battered wooden bench, perhaps at one time borrowed from the local school, when there had been a local school. "Don't move, or I'll catch you one. I'm not having you leave me again, yet a while."

Nigel set about examining the church door, but really there was little to examine. The situation could be taken in very nearly at a glance and a push.

Nigel took a couple of steps back and massed himself sideways.

Wasting no time, he had decided to charge the door, to break it down. Quite possibly it was already rickety, despite appearances.

But that time Millicent really did scream.

"No!"

The noise she had made seemed all the shriller when bursting upon the remarkable quietness that surrounded them. She could almost certainly have been heard in the erstwhile rectory, even though not by poor Lettice. Millicent had quite surprised herself. She was an unpracticed screamer.

She had even deflected Nigel for a moment.

She expostulated further. "Don't! Please don't!"

"Why not, chicken?" Almost beyond doubt, his surprise was largely real.

"If you want to, climb up outside and look in through the window, first." The volume and quality of her scream had given her a momentary ascendancy over him. "The other side of the church is easier."

He was staring at her. "All right. If you say so."

They went outside without his even holding on to her.

"No need to go round to the back," said Nigel. "I can manage perfectly well here. So can you, for that matter. Let's jump up together."

"No," said Millicent.

"Please yourself," said Nigel. "I suppose you've seen the bogey already. Or is it the black mass?" He was up in a single spring and adhering to nothing visible, like an ape. His head was sunk between his shoulders as he peered, so that his red curls made him resemble a larger Quasimodo, who, Millicent recollected, was always clinging to Gothic walls and descrying.

Nigel flopped down in silence. "I see what you mean," he said upon landing. "Not in the least a sight for sore eyes. Not a sight for little girls at all. Or even for big ones." He paused for a moment, while Millicent omitted to look at him. "All right. What else is there? Show me. Where do we go next?"

He propelled her back to the path across the churchyard and they began to descend towards the river.

It was, therefore, only another moment or two before Millicent realized that the pile of wreaths was no longer there: no sprays, no harps, no hearts, no angelic trumpets; only a handful of field flowers bound with common string. For a moment, Millicent merely doubted her eyes yet again, though not only her eyes.

"Don't think they use this place any longer," said Nigel. "Seems full up to me. That would explain whatever it is that's been going on in the church. What happens if we go through that gate?"

"There's a big meadow with cows in it and then a sort of passage down to the river."

"What sort of passage?"

"It runs between briars, and it's muddy."

"We don't mind a little mud, do we, rooster? What's the river called, anyway?"

"Winifred says it's called the Waste."

"Appropriate," said Nigel. "Though not any more, I hasten to add, not any more."

It was exactly as he said it that Millicent noticed the headstone. "Nigel Alsopp Ormathwaite Ticknor. Strong, Patient and True. Called to Higher Service." And a date. No date of birth: only the one date. That day's date.

The day that she had known to be a Thursday when Winifred had not.

The stone was in grey granite, or perhaps near granite. The section of it bearing the inscription had been planed and polished. When she had been here last, Millicent had been noticing little, and on the return from the picnic the inscription would not have confronted her in any case, as was shown by its confronting her now.

"Not any more," said Nigel a third time. "Let's make it up yet again, henny."

At least, Millicent stopped. She was staring at the inscription. Nigel's hands and arms were in no way upon or around her or particularly near her.

"I love you, chickpeas," said Nigel. "That's the trouble, isn't it? We got on better when I didn't." Seldom had Nigel been so clearsighted. It was eerie. Still, the time of which he spoke was another thing that had been long, long ago.

"I don't know what to say," said Millicent. What other words were possible? No longer were they children, or young people, or anything at all like that.

They went forward a few paces, so that the headstone now stood behind Millicent. She did not turn to see whether there were words upon the back of it.

Nigel went through the second kissing gate ahead of her. "Don't you bother," he said. "I expect you've been down to the river with Winifred. I know you won't run away now. I'll just take a quick peek at the fishing."

However, there seemed by now no point in not following him, and Millicent pushed back the gate in her turn.

"Please yourself," said Nigel. But Millicent had become aware of a development. The animals formerly in the far and upper corner were now racing across the open space towards Nigel and her, and so silently that Nigel had not so much as noticed them: "cows," she had described them, when speaking of them to Winifred; "stock," as her stepfather might have termed them. There is always an element of the absurd about British domestic animals behaving as if they were in the Wild West. Still, this time it was an element that might be overlooked.

"Nigel!" exclaimed Millicent, and drew back through the gate, which clanged away from her.

"Nigel!!"

He went sturdily on. We really should not be frightened of domestic animals in fields. Moreover, so quiet were these particular fields that Nigel still seemed unaware of anything moving other than himself.

"Nigel!!!"

The animals were upon him and leaving little doubt of their intentions, in so far as the last word was applicable. In no time, on the grass and on the hides, there was blood, and worse than blood. Before long, there was completely silent, but visibly most rampageous trampling. Tails were raised now, and eyes un- typically stark. But the mob of beasts, by its mere mass, probably concealed the worst from Millicent.

Seek help. That is what one is called upon to do in these cases. At the least, call for help. Millicent, recently so vocal, found that she could make no noise. The grand quietness had taken her in as well.

"Oh, Nigel, love."

But soon the animals were merely nuzzling around interestedly. It was as if they had played no part in the consummation towards which they were sniffing and over which they were slobbering.

Millicent clung to the iron gate. Never before that day had she screamed. Never yet in her life had she fainted.

Then she became aware that the churchyard had somehow filled with women, or, at least, that women were dotted here and there among the mounds and memorials, sometimes in twos, threes, and fours, though more commonly as single spies.

These women were not like the Willis in Winifred's favorite ballet. They were bleak and commonplace and often not young at all. Millicent could not feel herself drawn to them. But she realized that they were not merely in the churchyard but in the meadow too, from which the tempestuous cattle seemed to have withdrawn while for a second her back had been turned. In fact, at that moment the women were just about everywhere.

Absurd, absurd. Even now, Millicent could not overlook that element. The whole business simply could not be worth all this, and, in the world around her, everyone knew that it was not. Sometimes one suffered acutely, yes, but not even the suffering was ever quite real, let alone the events and experience supposedly suffered over. Life was not entirely, or even mainly, a matter of walking round a lake, if one might adopt Miss Stock's persuasive analogy.

None the less, it must have been more or less at this point that Millicent somehow lost consciousness.

Winifred was looking from above into her face. Winifred was no longer pale, but nearly her usual color, and renewed in confidence.

"My dear Millicent, I should have put you to bed instead of taking you out into the country! How on earth did you come to fall asleep?"

"Where are the cows?"

Winifred looked through the ironwork of the gate into the field behind her. "Not there, as far as I can see. I expect they've gone to be milked."

"They're not really cows at all, Winifred. Not ordinary cows."

"My dear girl!" Winifred looked at her hard, then seemed more seriously concerned. "Have you been attacked? Or frightened?"

"Not me," said Millicent.

"Then who?"

Millicent gulped and drew herself together.

"It was a dream. Merely a dream. I'd rather not talk about it."

"Poor sweet, you must be worn out. But how did you get down here? Have you been sleepwalking?"

"I was taken. That was part of the dream."

"It was shocking, that Stock woman going on as she did. You should have closed your ears."

"And eyes," said Millicent.

"I expect so," said Winifred, smiling. "It was a hideous place. If you're fully awake now, I expect you'd like to go? I've made a mess of the whole day."

"I couldn't see the car. I was looking for it."

"I moved it. I wanted to be out of sight. You couldn't have supposed I'd driven it through the churchyard."

"Anything seems possible," said Millicent, as they walked up the slope. "Anything. For example, you saw all those flowers. You saw them with your own eyes. Where are they?"

"They've been taken off to some hospital. It's what people do after funerals nowadays."

"And the mushrooms down by the river?"

"They were there from the first, as I told you."

"And Miss Stock's stories?" "She just needs a man. Oh, I'm sorry, Millicent."

"And the inside of the church?" "That was really rather nasty. I'm not going to talk about it, I'm not even going to think about it, and I'm certainly not going to let you look at it."

"Oughtn't whatever it is to be reported somewhere?"

"Not by me," said Winifred with finality.

As they had passed for the last time through the gate leading out of the churchyard, Winifred had said, "We're going home as quickly as possible. I'm taking you to my place, and I'm putting you to bed with a sedative. I don't really know about this kind of trouble, but I've seen what I've seen, and what you need in the first place is a good, long sleep, I'm sure of it."

Millicent herself knew that grief, especially repressed grief, was said to induce second sight, let alone second thoughts.

None the less, Millicent woke up at just before half past eleven. Long ago, in the early days with Nigel, one of them had each night telephoned the other at that time, and often they had conversed until midnight, when it had been agreed that the closure be applied. Such simplicities had come to an end years and years before, but on no evening since she had given up Nigel had Millicent gone to bed before that particular hour.

There was little chance of Nigel even remembering the old, sentimental arrangement and less chance of his now having anything easeful to say to her. Still, Millicent, having looked at her watch, lay there sedated and addled, but awake; and duly the telephone rang.

An extension led to the bedside in Winifred's cozy spare room. Winifred herself could not relax in a room without a telephone.

Millicent had the receiver in her hand at the first half-ping of the delicate little bell.

"Hullo," said Millicent softly to the darkness. Winifred had drawn all the curtains quite tight, since that was the way Winifred liked her own room at night.

"Hullo," said Millicent softly, a second time. At least it could hardly now be a call for Winifred. It was all the more important not to waken her.

On the line, or at the other end of it, something seemed to stir. There could be little doubt of it. It was not a mere reflex of the mechanism.

"Hullo," repeated Millicent softly.

Third time lucky, because at last there was a reply.

"Hullo, feathers," said Nigel.

In all the circumstances, Millicent could not possibly just ring off, as rationally she should have done.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"What a sight you look in Winifred's nightwear. Not your style at all, crop."

Every inch of Millicent's flesh started simultaneously to fall inwards. "Nigel! Where are you?" "I'm right outside your door, gizzard. Better come at once. But do wear your own pajamas. The scarlet ones. The proper ones."

"I'm not coming, Nigel. I've told you that. I mean it."

"I'm sure you mean it since you left me to be trodden upon by a lot of bloody heifers without doing one thing except grin. It makes no difference. Less difference than ever, in fact. I want you and I'm waiting outside your door now."

She simply couldn't speak. What could she possibly say?

"You come to me, three toes," said Nigel, "and wearing your own clothes. Or, make no mistake, I'm coming to you."

The receiver fell from Millicent's hand. It crashed to the bedroom floor, but the carpet in Winifred's guest bedroom was substantial, and Winifred heard nothing. In any case, Winifred herself had just passed a trying day also and needed her rest before the demands of life on the morrow, the renewed call of the wild.

A group of concerned friends, male and female, clustered round

Winifred after the inquest, for which a surprising number had taken time off.

"I have never been in love," said Winifred. "I really don't understand about it."

People had to accept that and get on with things, routine and otherwise. What else could they do?

The Fetch (1980)

In all that matters, I was an only child. There was a brother once, but I never saw him, even though he lived several years. My father, a Scottish solicitor or law agent, and very much a Scot, applied himself early to becoming an English barrister, and, as happens to Scots, was made a Judge of the High Court, when barely in middle age.

In Court, he was stupendous. From the first, I was taken once every ten days by Cuddy, my nurse, to the public gallery in order to behold him and hearken to him for forty minutes or so. If I made the slightest stir or whimper, it was subtly but effectively repaid me; on those and all other occasions. Judges today are neither better nor worse than my father, but they are different.

At home, my father, only briefly visible, was as a wraith with a will and power that no one available could resist. The will and power lingered undiminished when my father was not in the house, which, in the nature of things, was for most of the time. As well as the Court, and the chambers, there were the club and the dining club, the livery company and the military historical society, all of which my father attended with dedication and sacrifice. With equal regularity, he pursued the cult of self-defence, in several different branches, and with little heed for the years. He was an elder of a Scottish church in a London suburb, at some distance from where we lived. He presided over several successive Royal Commissions, until one day he threw up his current presidency in a rage of principle and was never invited again. After his death I realised that a further centre of his interest had been a club of a different kind, a very expensive and sophisticated one. I need not say how untrue it is that Scots are penny-scraping in all things.

I was terrified of my father. I feared almost everything, but there was nothing I feared more than to encounter my father or to pick up threads from his intermittent murmurings in the corridors and closets. We lived in a huge house at the centre of Belgravia. No Judge could afford such an

establishment now. In addition, there was the family home of Pollaporra, modest, comfortless, and very remote. Our ancestry was merely legal and commercial, though those words have vastly more power in Scotland than in England. In Scotland, accomplishments are preferred to graces. As a child, I was never taken to Pollaporra. I never went there at all until much later, on two occasions, as I shall unfold.

I was frightened also of Cuddy, properly Miss Hester MacFerrier; and not least when she rambled on, as Scottish women do, of the immense bags and catches ingathered at Pollaporra by our ancestors and their like-minded acquaintances. She often emphasised how cold the house was at all times and how far from a 'made road'. Only the elect could abide there, one gathered; but there were some who could never bear to leave, and who actually shed tears upon being compelled by the advancing winter to do so. When the snow was on the ground, the house could not be visited at all; not even by the factor to the estate, who lived down by the sea loch, and whose name was Mason. Cuddy had her own methods for compelling the attention of any child to every detail she cared to impart. I cannot recall when I did not know about Mason. He was precisely the man for a Scottish nursemaid to uphold as an example.

My father was understood to dislike criminal cases, which, as an advanced legal theorist and technician, he regarded with contempt. He varied the taking of notes at these times by himself sketching in lightning caricature the figures in the dock to his left. The caricatures were ultimately framed, thirty or forty at a time; whereafter Haverstone, the odd-job man, spent upwards of a week hanging them at different places in our house, according to precise directions written out by my father, well in advance. Anybody who could read at all could at any time read every word my father wrote, despite the millions of words he had to set down as a duty. Most of the other pictures in our house were engravings after Landseer and Millais and Paton. Generations of Scottish aunts and uncles had also contributed art works of their own, painstaking and gloomy.

I was afraid of Haverstone, because of his disfigurements and his huge size. I used to tiptoe away whenever I heard his breathing. I never cared or dared to ask how he had come to be so marked. Perhaps my idea of his bulk was a

familiar illusion of childhood. We shall scarcely know; in that Haverstone, one day after my seventh birthday, fell from a railway bridge into the main road beneath and was destroyed by a lorry. Cuddy regarded Haverstone with contempt and never failed to claim that my father employed him only out of pity. I never knew what he was doing on the railway bridge, but later I became aware of a huge mental hospital near by and drew obvious conclusions.

My mother I adored and revered. For better or for worse, one knows the words of Stendhal: 'My mother was a charming woman, and I was in love with my mother.... I wanted to cover my mother with kisses and wished there weren't any clothes.... She too loved me passionately. She kissed me, and I returned those kisses sometimes with such passion that she had to leave me.' Thus it was with me; and, as with Stendhal, so was the sequel.

My mother was very dark, darker than me, and very exotic. I must suppose that only the frenzy of Scottish lust brought my father to marrying her. At such times, some Scots lose hold on all other considerations; in a way never noticed by me among Englishmen. By now, my father's fit was long over. At least he did not intrude upon us, as Stendhal's father did. I am sure that jealousy was very prominent in my father, but perhaps he scorned to show it. He simply kept away from his wife entirely. At least as far as I could see. And I saw most things, though facing far from all of them, and acknowledging none of them.

Day after day, night after night, I lay for hours at a time in my mother's big bed, with my head between her breasts, and my tongue gently extended, as in infancy. The room was perfumed, the bed was perfumed, her nightdress was perfumed, she was perfumed. To a child, it set the idea of Heaven. Who wants any other? My mother's body, as well as being so dark, was sorter all over than anyone else's, and sweeter than anything merely physical and fleeting, different and higher altogether. Her rich dark hair, perfumed of itself, fell all about me, as in the East.

There was no social life in our home, no visiting acquaintances, no family connections, no chatter. My father had detached himself from his own folk by his marriage. My mother loved no one but me. I am sure of that. I was in a position to know. The only callers were her hairdresser, her dressmaker,

her maker of shoes and boots, her parfumier, her fabricator of lingerie, and perhaps one or two others of the kind. While she was shorn, scented, and fitted, I sat silently in the corner on a little grey hassock. None of the callers seemed to object. They knew the world and what it was like: and would soon enough be like for me. They contained themselves.

I was there whatever my mother did; without exception.

Cuddy dragged me off at intervals for fresh air, but not for very long. I could see for myself that Cuddy, almost familiar with my father, was afraid of my mother. I never knew why, and am far from certain now, but was glad of the fact. It was the key circumstance that transformed the potential of utter wretchedness for me into utter temporary bliss.

My mother taught me all I know that matters; smiling and laughing and holding me and rewarding me, so that always I was precocity incarnate; alike in concepts, dignity, and languages. Unfortunately, my mother was often ill, commonly for days, sometimes for weeks; and who was there to care, apart from me, who could do nothing – even if there was something that others could have done? My lessons ceased for a spell, but as soon as possible, or sooner, were bravely resumed.

Later, I strayed through other places of education, defending myself as best I could, and not unsuccessfully either; and, of what I needed, learning what I could. It was not my father who dispatched me. He regarded me without interest or expectation. To him I was the enduring reminder of a season's weakness. The ultimate care of me lay with Trustees, as often in Scotland; though only once did I see them as individuals, and hardly even then, because the afternoon was overcast, and all the lights were weak, for some reason that I forget.

Before all that formal education, I had encountered the woman on the stairs. This brief and almost illusory episode was the first of the two turning points in my life and I suspect the more important.

I had been playing on the landing outside the door of my mother's room. I do not know how long she had been ill that time. I feared to count the days,

and never did so. I am sure that it was longer than on various previous occasions. I was alarmed, as always; but not especially alarmed.

My mother had been instrumental in my being given a railway, a conjuring outfit, and a chemical set: those being the things that small boys were supposed to like. My father should have given me soldiers, forts, and guns; possibly a miniature, but accurate, cricket bat; but he never once gave me anything, or spoke at all in our house if he could avoid it – except, on unpredictable occasions, to himself, memorably, as I have hinted.

I mastered the simple illusions, and liked the outfit, but had no one to awe. Even my mother preferred to hug me than for me to draw the ace of spades or a tiny white rabbit from her soft mouth. The chemical effects, chlorine gas and liquid air, I never mastered at that time, nor wished to. The railway I loved (no other word), though it was very miniature: neither 1 gauge (in those days) nor 0 gauge, but something smaller than 00. The single train, in the Royal Bavarian livery of before the First World War, clinked round a true circle; but en route it traversed a tunnel with two cows painted on top and one painted sheep, and passed through two separate stations, where both passengers and staff were painted on the tin walls, and all the signs were in Gothic.

That day, I had stopped playing, owing to the beating of my heart; but I had managed to pack everything into the boxes. I needed no bidding to do that, and never had done. I was about to lug the heap upstairs, which by then I could perfectly well do. I heard the huge clock in the hall strike half past three. The clock had come from Pollaporra, and reached the ceiling. I looked at my watch, as I heard it. I was always doing that. It was very late autumn, just before Christmas, but not yet officially winter. There is nothing in this world I know better than exactly what day of the year it was. It is for ever written in the air before me.

My ears were made keen by always listening. Often, wherever I was, even at the top of the house, I waited motionless for the enormous clock to strike, lest the boom take me by surprise. But the ascending woman was upon me before I had heard a footfall. I admit that all the carpets were thickest Brussels and Wilton. I often heard footfalls, none the less, especially my

father's strangely uneven tread. I do not think I heard the woman make a sound from first to last. But last was very close to first.

She had come up the stairs, beyond doubt, even though I had neither heard nor seen anything; because by the time I did observe her, she was still two or three steps from the top of the flight. It was a wide staircase, but she was ascending in a very curious way, far further from the rail than was necessary and far nearer to the wall, and with her head and face actually turned to the wall.

At that point, I did hear something. I heard someone shut the front door below; which could not be seen from where I stood. I was surprised that I had not heard the door being opened, and the words of enquiry and caution. I remember my surprise. All these sounds were unusual in our house at that time.

I felt the cold air that the woman had brought in with her from the December streets and squares, and a certain cold smell; but she never once turned towards me. She could easily have been quite unaware of me; but I was watching her every motion. She had black hair, thin and lank. She was dressed in a dirty red and blue plaid of some kind, tightly wound. I was of course used to pictures of people in plaids. The woman's shoes were cracked and very unsuited to the slush outside. She moved with short steps, and across the carpet she left a thin trail of damp, though I knew that it was not raining. It was one of the things I always knew. Everything about the woman was of a kind that children particularly fear and dislike. Women, when frightening, are to children enormously more frightening than any man or men.

I think I was too frightened even to shrink back. As the woman tottered past, I stood there with my boxes beside me. My idea of her motion was that she had some difficulty with it, but was sustained by extreme need. Perhaps that is a fancy that only came to me later.

I never had any doubt about where the woman was going but, even so, I was unable to move or to speak or to do anything at all.

As she traversed the few yards of the landing, she extended her right arm and grimy hand from out of her plaid, the hand and arm nearer to me, still without in any degree turning her head. In no time at all, and apparently without looking, she had opened the door of my sweet mother's room, had passed within, and had shut the door behind her.

I suppose it is unnecessary for me to say that when my mother was ill, her door was never locked; but perhaps it is not unnecessary. I myself never entered at such times. My mother could not bear me to see her when she was ill.

There was no one sympathetic to whom I could run crying and screaming. In such matters, children are much influenced by the facilities available. For me, there was only my mother, and, in fact, I think I might actually have gone in after the woman, though not boldly. However, before I was able to move at all, I heard Cuddy's familiar clump ascending the stair behind me as I gazed at the shut door.

'What are you doing now?' asked Cuddy.

'Who was that?' I asked.

'Who was who?' Cuddy asked me back. 'Or what?'

'The woman who's gone in there.'

'Whist! It's time *you* were in bed with Christmas so near.'

'It *wasn't* Father Christmas,' I cried.

'I daresay not,' said Cuddy. 'Because it wasn't anybody.'

'It was, Cuddy. It *was*. Go in and look.'

It seems to me that Cuddy paused at that for a moment, though it may only have been my own heart that paused.

It made no difference.

'It's bed for you, man,' said Cuddy. 'You're overexcited and we all know where that ends.'

*

Needless to say, it was impossible for me to sleep, either in the dark or in the light: the choice being always left to me, which was perhaps unusual in those days. I heard the hours and the half hours all through the night, and at one or two o'clock my father's irregular step, always as if he were dodging something or someone imperfectly seen, and his periodical mutterings and jabberings as he plodded.

All was deeply upsetting to a child, but I must acknowledge that by then I was reasonably accustomed to most of it. One explanation was that I had no comparisons available. As far as I knew, all people behaved as did those in my home. It is my adult opinion that many more, in fact, do so behave than is commonly supposed, or at least acknowledged.

Still, that night must have proved exceptional for me; because when Cuddy came to call me in the morning, she found that I was ill too. Children, like adults, have diseases that it is absurd to categorise. Most diseases, perhaps all, are mainly a collapse or part-collapse of the personality. I dare say a name for that particular malady of mine might in those days have been brain fever. I am not sure that brain fever is any longer permitted to be possible. I am sure that my particular malady went on for weeks, and that when I was once more deemed able to make sense out of things, I learned that my mother was dead, and, indeed, long buried. No one would tell me where. I further gathered that there was no memorial.

About four weeks after that, or so it now seems to me, but perhaps it was longer, I was told that my father was proposing to remarry, though he required the consent of the Trustees. A Judge was but a man as far as the Trustees were concerned, a man within the scope of their own settlement and appointment. Thus it was that I acquired my stepmother; *née* Miss Agnes Emily Fraser, but at the moment a widow, Mrs Johnny Robertson of Baulk. To her the Trustees had no objection, it seemed.

*

I still have no idea of why my father married Agnes Robertson, or why he remarried at all. I do not think it can have been the motive that prompted his earlier marriage. From all that, since his death, I have learned of his ways, the notion would seem absurd. It was true that the lady had wealth. In the end, the Trustees admitted as much; and that much of it was in Burmah Oil. I doubt whether this was the answer either. I do not think that more money could have helped my father very much. I am not sure that by then anything could have helped him. This is confirmed by what happened to him, conventional in some ways though it was.

Moreover, the marriage seemed to me to make no difference to his daily way of life: the bench, the chambers, the club, the dining club, the livery company, the military historical society, the self-defence classes, the kirk; or, I am sure, to those other indulgences. On most nights, he continued to ponder and by fits and starts to cry out. I still tiptoed swiftly away and, if possible, hid myself when I heard his step. I seldom set eyes upon my stepmother, though of course I am not saying that I never did. I took it for granted that her attitude to me was at least one thing that she shared with my father. That seemed natural. I found it hard to see what else she had any opportunity of sharing. It had, of course, always been Cuddy to whom I was mainly obliged for information about my father's habits and movements, in so far as she knew them. Cuddy was much less informative about my stepmother.

One new aspect of my own life was that my lessons had stopped. I believe that for more than a year I had nothing to do but keep out of the way and play, as far as was possible. Now, there seemed to be no callers at all, and assuredly not parfumiers and designers of lingerie. No doubt my stepmother's circle was entirely in Scotland, and probably to the north of the Forth and Clyde Canal. She would not have found it easy to create an entirely new circle in Belgravia. I suppose there were two reasons why I suffered less than I might have done from the unsatisfactory aspects of my situation. The first was that I could hardly suffer more than I was suffering from my sweet mother's death. The second reason was my suspicion that any other life I might be embarked upon would be even more unsatisfactory.

In the end, the Trustees intervened, as I have said; but, before that, Cuddy had something to impart, at long last, about my stepmother. She told me that my stepmother was drinking.

It debarred her, Cuddy informed me in a burst of gossip, from appearing in public very often. That was exactly how Cuddy expressed it; with a twinkle or a glint or whatever may be the Scottish word for such extra intimations. I gathered that my stepmother seldom even dressed herself, or permitted herself to be dressed by Cuddy. One thing I was not told and do not positively know is whether or not the poor lady was drinking as hard as this before her second marriage. It is fair to her to say that the late Johnny Robertson was usually described as a scamp or rogue. Certainly my stepmother's current condition was something that would have had to be concealed by everyone as far as possible at that time in Belgravia, and with her husband a High Court Judge.

In any case, after the Trustees had taken me away and sent me to an eminent school, I began to hear tales. At first, I knocked about those who hurled and spat them at me. I discovered a new strength in the process; just as the grounding (to use the favoured word) provided by my mother enabled me to do better than most in class, not so much by knowing more as by using greater imagination and ingenuity, qualities that tell even in rivalry among schoolboys. The jibes and jeers ceased, and then I began cautiously to enquire after the facts. The school was of the kind attended by many who really know such things. I learned that my father too had long been drinking; and was a byword for it in the counties and the clubs. No doubt in the gaols also, despite my father's dislike of criminal jurisdiction.

One morning, Jesperson, who was the son of a Labour ex-minister and quite a friend of mine, brought me *The Times* so that I could see the news before others did. I read that my father had had to be removed from his Court and sent for treatment. *The Times* seemed to think that if the treatment were not successful, he might feel it proper to retire. There was a summary of the cases over which he had presided from such an unusually early age (some of them had been attended by me, however fleetingly); and a reference to his almost universal popularity in mainly male society.

I was by then in a position at school to take out any chagrin I might feel upon as many other boys as I wished, but I was too introspective for any such easy release, and instead began for the first time to read *The Divine Comedy.*

There was nothing particularly unusual in what had happened to my father so far, but the treatment seems, as far as one can tell, to have been the conclusive ordeal, so that he died a year later in a mental hospital, like poor Haverstone, though not in the same one. My father returned in spirit to his sodden, picturesque wilderness, and is buried in the kirkyard four or five miles by a very rough road from Pollaporra. It was the first instruction in his will, and the Trustees heeded it, as a matter of urgency, to the last detail.

I could not myself attend the funeral, as I was laid low by a school epidemic, though by then in my last term, and older than any of my confrères. My stepmother also missed the funeral, though she had returned to Scotland as soon as she could. She had resolved to remain there, and, for all I know, she is there still, with health and sobriety renewed. Several times I have looked her up in directories and failed to find her, despite reference to all three of her known surnames; but I reflect that she may well have married yet again.

My father had left her a moiety of his free estate, in equal part with the various organisations he wished to benefit, and which I have already listed. She possessed, as I have said, means of her own. My father left me nothing at all, but he lacked power, Judge though he was, and a Scots solicitor also, to modify the family settlement. Therefore, I, as only surviving child, inherited a life interest in Pollaporra, though not in the house in Belgravia, and a moderate, though not remarkable, income for life. Had my brother survived, he would have inherited equally. Thinking about him, I wondered whether the demon drink, albeit so mighty among Scotsmen, had not rather been a symptom of my father's malady than the cause of it. Thinking of that, I naturally then thought about my own inwardness and prospects. Eugene O'Neill says that we become like our parents of the same sex, even when we consciously resolve not to. I wept for my mother, so beloved, so incomparable.

II

Immediately, the question arose of my going to a university. The idea had of course been discussed before with the Trustees, but I had myself rejected it. While my father had been alive, my plan had been simply to leave the country as soon as I could. Thanks to my mother, I had made a good start with two European languages, and I had since advanced a little by reading literature written in them: *Die Räuber* and *Gerusalemme Liberata.* The other boys no longer attacked or bullied me when they found me doing such things; and the school library contained a few basic texts, mostly unopened, both in the trade sense and the literal sense.

Now I changed my mind. The Trustees were clamant for Edinburgh, as could be expected; but I scored an important victory in actually going to Oxford. Boys from that school did not proceed to Edinburgh University, or did not then. It had never been practicable to send me to Fettes or Loretto. My friend, Jesperson, was at Oxford already. Oxford was still regarded by many as a dream, even though mainly in secret and in silence.

I read Modern Languages and Modern History, and I graduated reasonably, though not excitingly. I surprised myself by making a number of friends. This brought important benefits, in the short term and the long.

I now had no home other than Pollaporra, which, as will be recalled, could not always be visited during the winter, in any case. I spent most of the vacations with new friends; staying in their homes for astonishingly generous periods of time, or travelling with them, or reading with them. With the Second World War so plainly imminent and so probably apocalyptic, everyone travelled as much as he could. I met girls, and was continually amazed by myself. My closest involvement was with a pretty girl who lived in the town; who wrote poetry that was published; and who was almost a cripple. That surprised me most of all. I had learned something about myself, though I was unsure what it was. The girl lived, regardless, at the top of the house, which taught me something further. Her name was Celia. I fear that I brought little happiness to her or to any of the others, do what I would. I soon realised that I was a haunted man.

As for the main longer-term benefit, it was simple enough, and a matter of seemingly pure chance. My friend, Jack Oliver, spoke to his uncle, and as soon as I went down, modestly though not gloriously endorsed, I found

myself en route to becoming a merchant banker. I owe Jack a debt that nothing can repay. That too is somehow a property of life. Nothing interlocks or properly relates. Life gives, quite casually, with one hand, and takes away rather more with the other hand, equally unforeseeably. There is little anyone can do about either transaction. Jack Oliver was and is the kindest man I have known, and a splendid offhand tennis player. He has a subtle wit, based on meiosis. From time to time, he has needed it. I have never climbed or otherwise risen to the top of the banking tree, but the tree is tall, and I lived as a child in a house with many stairs.

It was Perry Jesperson who came with me on my first visit to Pollaporra. He had borrowed one of his father's cars.

Even on the one-inch map, the topography was odd. It had struck me as odd many years before. I had always thought myself good with maps, as solitary children so often are; but now that I had been able to travel frequently, I had come to see that one cannot in every case divine from a map a feature of some kind that seems central when one actually arrives and inspects. In that way, I had made a fool of myself on several occasions, though sometimes to my own knowledge only. When it comes to Scotland, I need hardly say that many one-inch maps are sometimes needed for a journey from one place to another, and that some of the maps depict little but heaving contours and huge hydroelectric installations.

Pollaporra stood isolated amid wild altitudes for miles around. Its loneliness was confirmed by its being marked at all. I knew very well that it was no Inveraray or even Balmoral. It stood about three and a half miles from the sea loch, where Mason lived. That of course was as the crow flies, if crows there were. I had miled out the distance inaccurately with thumb and forefinger when I had still been a child. I had done it on many occasions. The topographical oddity was that the nearest depicted community was eight miles away in the opposite direction, whereas in such an area one would expect it to be on the sea, and to derive its hard living therefrom. It was difficult to think of any living at all for the place shown, which was stuck down in a hollow of the mountains, and was named Arrafergus. An uncoloured track was shown between Pollaporra and Arrafergus; the rough road of which I had heard so much, and along which my father's corpse had

passed a few years before. One could see the little cross marking the kirk and kirkyard where he lay. It was placed almost half-way between the two names, which seemed oddest of all. For much of the year, no congregation could assemble from either house or village. A footpath was shown between Pollaporra and the sea loch, but one could hardly believe in more than a technical right of way, perhaps initiated by smugglers and rebels.

I had commented upon all this to Jesperson before we left. He had said, 'I expect it was an effect of the clearances.'

'Or of the massacres,' I had replied, not wishing to become involved in politics with Jesperson, even conversationally.

The roads were already becoming pretty objectionable, but Jesperson saw it all as progress, and we took it in turns to drive. On the third morning, we were advancing up the long road, yellow on the map, from the dead centre of Scotland to little Arrafergus. By English standards, it should not have been shown in yellow. Even Jesperson could hardly achieve more than a third of his normal speed. We had seen no other human being for a very long time, and even animals were absent, exactly as I had expected. Why was Arrafergus placed where it was, and how could it survive? Long ago the soaking mist had compelled us to put up the hood of the roadster. I admit that it was April.

In the early afternoon, the road came to an end. We were in a deep cleft of the rock-strewn hills, and it would have been impossible for it to go further. There was a burn roaring, rather than gurgling, over the dark stones. There was no community, no place, not even a road sign saying where we were or prohibiting further progress, not a shieling, not a crow. I speculated about what the funeral cortège could have done next.

'Do you want to get out and look for the foundations?' enquired Jesperson. 'There's probably the odd stone to be found. The landlords razed everything, but I'm told there are usually traces.'

'Not for the moment,' I said. 'Where do you suppose is the track to Pollaporra?'

'Up there,' said Jesperson immediately, and pointed over my head.

How had I missed it? Despite the drizzle, I could now see it quite plainly. Nor must I, or anyone, exaggerate. The track was exceedingly steep and far from well metalled, but, apart from the angle of incline, hardly worse to look at than the yellow road. Obviously, it must be difficult to keep the maps up to date, and in certain areas hardly worth while at present prices.

'Are we game?' I asked Jesperson. 'It's not your car, and I don't want to press.'

'We've got to spend the night somewhere,' said Jesperson, who had not even stopped the engine.

After that, all went surprisingly well. Cars were tougher and more flexible in those days. We ascended the mountain without once stopping, and there were no further major gradients until we came within sight of Pollaporra itself. I had feared that the track would die out altogether or become a desert of wiry weeds such as spring up vengefully on modern roads, if for a moment neglected.

The little kirk was wrapped in rain which was now much heavier. There were a few early flowers amidst and around the crumbling kirkyard walls. By June there would be more.

Jesperson drew up and this time stopped the engine reverently.

'It's all yours,' he said, glancing at me sideways.

I stepped out. The huge new monument dominated the scene.

I scrambled across the fallen stones.

My father's full name was there, and his dates of birth and death. And then, in much smaller lettering,A JUST MANA BRAVE MAN AND A GOOD. That was it, the commemorated was no one's beloved husband or beloved father; nor were any of his honours specified; nor was confident hope

expressed for him, or, by implication, for anyone, he having been so admirable.

Around were memorials, large and small, to others among my unknown ancestors and collaterals; all far gone in chipping, flaking, and greening, or all that I studied. Among us we seemed to cram the entire consecrated area. Perhaps the residue from other families had no mementoes. I was aware of the worms and maggots massed beneath my feet; crawling over one another, as in a natural history exhibit. At any moment, the crepe rubber soles of my shoes might crack and rot. Moreover, did the Church of Scotland ritually consecrate any place? I did not know. I turned round and realised that in the distance I could see Pollaporra also.

The house, though no more than a grey stone, slate-roofed rectangle, neither high nor particularly long, dominated the scene from then on, probably because it was the only work of man visible, apart from the bad road. Also it seemed to stand much higher than I had expected.

Jesperson wisely refused to set his father's car at the final ascent. We went up on foot. From the ridge we could make out the sea loch, green and phantasmal in the driving drizzle.

Cuddy was living in the house now; virtually pensioned off by the Trustess, and retained as caretaker: also as housekeeper, should the need arise, as it now did, almost certainly for the first time.

'Cuddy,' I cried out in my best English university style, and with hand outstretched, as we entered. It was desirable to seem entirely confident.

'Brodick,' she replied, not familiar perhaps, but independent.

'This is Mr. Jesperson.'

'It's too late for the shooting and too early for the fishing,' said Cuddy. I think those were her words. I never quite remember the seasons.

'Mr. Leith has come to take possession,' said Perry Jesperson.

'It's his for his life,' said Cuddy, as if indicating the duration of evening playtime.

'How *are* things?' I asked in my English university way. I was trying to ignore the chill, inner and outer, which the place cast.

'Wind and watertight as far as this house is concerned. You can inspect it at once. You'll not find one slate misplaced. For the rest you must ask Mr. Mason.'

'I shall do so tomorrow,' I replied. 'You must set me on the way to him.'

'It is a straight road,' said Cuddy. 'You'll not go wrong.'

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Of course it was not a road at all, but a scramble over rocks and stones all three miles; slow, slippery, and tiring. I could see why Mason spent little of his time visiting. None the less, the way was perfectly straight to the sea; though only from the top could one discern that. Jesperson had volunteered to look for some sport. Cuddy had been discouraging, but the house was as crammed with gear as the kirkyard with ancestral bones.

Mason lived in a small, single-storeyed house almost exactly at the end of the path, and at the edge of the sea. The local letter-box was in his grey wall, with a single collection at 6:30A.M. each day, apart from Saturdays, Sundays, and Public Holidays. There were a few other small houses, too small for the map but apparently occupied, and even a shop, with brooms in the window. The shop was now closed, and there was no indication of opening hours. A reasonably good, though narrow, road traversed the place, and in both directions disappeared along the edge of the loch. It ran between the path from Pollaporra and Mason's house. There was no detectable traffic, but there was a metal bus-stop sign, and a time-table in a frame. I looked at it. If Jesperson's father's car were to break up, as seemed quite likely, we should need alternative transport. I saw that the bus appeared at 7:00A.M. on the first Wednesday in each month between April and September. We had missed the April bus. I persisted and saw that the bus returned as early as 4:30P.M. on the same day, and then went on to

Tullochar at the head of the loch. Despite the length of the inlet, the waves were striking the narrow, stony beach sharply and rapidly. A few small broken boats were lying about, and some meshes of sodden net, with shapeless cork floats. There was even a smell of dead crustaceans.

I realised that all these modest investigations were being observed by Mason himself. He had opened the faded brown door of his house and was standing there.

'Brodick Leith,' he said, in the Scottish manner.

'Mr. Mason,' I replied. 'I am very glad to meet you. I have heard about you all my life.'

'Ay,' said Mason, 'you would have. Come indoors. We'll have a drop together and then I'll show you the books. I keep them to the day and hour. There's not as much to do as once there was.'

'That was in my father's time?'

'In the Judge's time. Mr. Justice Leith. Sir Roderic Leith, if you prefer. A strong man and a mysterious.'

'I agree with what you say.'

'Come inside,' said Mason. 'Come inside. I live as an unmarried man.'

Mason opened a new bottle, and before I left, we had made our way through all of it, and had started on the remains of the previous one. Though I drank appreciably less than half, it was still, I think, more spirit than I had drunk on any previous occasion. The books were kept in lucid and impersonal handwriting, almost as good as my father's, and were flawless, in so far as I could understand them; my career in banking having not yet begun. Mason left me to go through them with the bottle at my elbow, while he went into the next room to cook us steaks, with his own hands. I could see for myself that the amounts brought out as surplus or profit at the end of each account were not large. I had never supposed they would be, but the costs and responsibilities of land ownership were brought home to me, none

the less. Until then, I had been a baby in the matter, as in many others. Most people are babies until they confront property ownership.

'I know you attended my father's funeral, Mr. Mason,' I said. 'How was it? Tell me about it.' The steak was proving to be the least prepared that I had ever attempted to munch. No doubt the cooking arrangements were very simple. I had not been invited to inspect them.

'Ay,' said Mason, 'and the funeral was the least of it.' He took a heavier swig than before and stopped chewing altogether, while he thought.

'How many were there?' I had always been curious about that.

'Just me, and Cuddy MacFerrier, and the Shepstones.'

The Shepstones were relatives. I had of course never set eyes upon even one of them. I had never seen a likeness. Millais had never painted a single Shepstone, and if one or more of them had appeared upon a criminal charge, my father would hardly have been the Judge.

'How many Shepstones?' I asked, still essaying to devour.

'Just the three of them,' replied Mason, as if half-entranced. I am making little attempt to reproduce the Scottishness of his speech, or of anyone else's. I am far from being Sir Walter or George Douglas.

'That is all there are?'

'Just the three. That's all,' said Mason. 'Drink up, man.'

'A minister was there, of course?'

'Ay, the minister turned out for it. The son was sick, or so he said.'

'I am the son,' I said, smiling. 'And I *was* sick. I promise you that.'

'No need to promise anything,' said Mason, still motionless. 'Drink up, I tell you.'

'And no one else at all?' I persisted.

'Maybe the old carlin,' said Mason. 'Maybe her.'

For me that was a very particular Scottish word. I had in fact sprung half to my feet, as Mason spoke it.

'Dinna fash yoursel'. She's gone awa' for the noo,' said Mason.

He began once more to eat.

'I saw her once myself,' I said, sitting right down again. 'I saw her when my darling mother died.'

'Ay, you would,' said Mason. 'Especially if maybe you were about the house at the time. Who let her in?'

'I don't know,' I replied. 'Perhaps she doesn't have to be let in?'

'Och, she does that,' said Mason. 'She always has to be let in.'

'It was at the grave that you saw her?'

'No, not there, though it is my fancy that she was present. I saw her through that window as she came up from the sea.'

I know that Mason pointed, and I know that I did not find it the moment to look.

'Through the glass panes or out on the wee rocks you can view the spot,' said Mason. 'It's always the same.' Now he was looking at nothing and chewing vigorously.

'I saw no face,' I said.

'If you'd seen that, you wouldn't be here now,' said Mason. He was calm, as far as I could see.

'How often have you seen her yourself?'

'Four or five times in all. At the different deaths.'

'Including at my mother's death?'

'Yes, then too,' said Mason, still gazing upon the sawn-up sections of meat. 'At the family deaths she is seen, and at the deaths of those, whoever they be, that enter the family.'

I thought of my brother whom I had never known. I wasn't even aware that there had been any other family deaths during Mason's likely lifetime.

'She belongs to those called Leith, by one right or another,' said Mason, 'and to no one at all else.'

As he spoke, and having regard to the way he had put it, I felt that I saw why so apparently alert a man seemed to have such difficulty in remembering that I was presumably a Leith myself. I took his consideration kindly.

'I didn't see anyone when the Judge died,' I remarked.

'Perhaps in a dream,' said Mason. 'I believe you were sick at the time.'

That was not quite right of course, but it was true that I had by no means been in the house.

We dropped the subject, and turned once more to feu duties, rents, and discriminatory taxes; even to the recent changes in the character of the tides and in the behaviour of the gannets.

I have no idea how I scrambled back to dismal Pollaporra, and in twilight first, soon in darkness. Perhaps the liquor aided instead of impeded, as liquor so often in practice does, despite the doctors and proctors.

III

After the war, Jack Oliver was there to welcome me back to the office off Cornhill. He was now a colonel. His uncle had been killed in what was known as an incident, when the whole family house had been destroyed,

including the Devises and De Wints. The business was now substantially his.

I found myself advanced very considerably from the position I had occupied in 1939. From this it is not to be supposed, as so many like to suppose, that no particular aptitude is required for success in merchant banking. On the contrary, very precise qualities both of mind and of temperament are needed. About myself, the conclusion I soon reached was that I was as truly a Scottish businessman as my ancestors in the kirkyard, whether I liked it or not, as O'Neill says. I should have been foolish had I *not* liked it. I might have preferred to be a weaver of dreams, but perhaps my mother had died too soon for that to be possible. I must add, however, that the business was by no means the same as when I had entered it before the war. No business was the same. The staff was smaller, the atmosphere tenser. The gains were illusory, the prospects shadowy. One worked much less hard, but one believed in nothing. There was little to work for, less to believe in.

It was in the office, though, that I met Shulie. She seemed very lost. I was attracted by her at once.

'Are you looking for someone?' I asked.

'I have just seen Mr. Oliver.' She had a lovely voice and a charming accent. I knew that Jack was seeking a new secretary. His present one had failed to report for weeks, or to answer her supposed home telephone number.

'I hope that all went well.'

Shulie shook her head and smiled a little.

'I'm sorry about that.'

'Mr. Oliver had chosen a girl who went in just before me. It always happens.'

'I'm sure you'll have better luck soon.'

She shook her head a second time. 'I am not English.'

'That has advantages as well as disadvantages,' I replied firmly.

It struck me that she might be a refugee, with behind her a terrible story. She was small, slender, and dark, though not as dark as my mother. I could not decide whether or not she looked particularly Jewish. I daresay it is always a rather foolish question.

'No advantages when you are in England,' she said. 'Can you please tell me how to get out of this place?'

'I'll come with you,' I said. 'It's difficult to explain.'

That was perfectly true. It matters that it was true, because while we were winding through the corridors, and I was holding swing doors, I was successful in persuading Shulie to have lunch with me. Time was gained for me also by the fact that Shulie had a slight limp, which slowed her down quite perceptibly. I am sure she was weary, too, and I even believe that she was seriously underfed, whatever the exact reason. I perceived Shulie as a waif from the start; though also from the start I saw that it was far from the whole truth about her. I never learned the whole truth about her. Perhaps one never does learn, but Shulie refused, in so many words, to speak about it.

It was February, and outside I could have done with my overcoat. Jack Oliver still went everywhere in a British warm. He had several of them. There was snow on the ground and on the ledges. We had been under snow for weeks. Though do I imagine the snow? I do not imagine the cold. Shulie, when the blast struck her, drew into herself, as girls do. She was certainly not dressed for it; but few girls then were. The girlish image was still paramount. I myself actually caught a cold that day, as I often did. I was laid up for a time in my small flat off Orchard Street, and with no one in any position to look after me very much. Later, Shulie explained to me that one need never catch cold. All that is necessary is a firm resolution against it: faith in oneself, I suppose.

On most days, Jack and I, together or apart, went either to quite costly places or to certain pubs. That was the way of life approved, expected, even enforced; and, within the limits of the time, rewarded. I, however, had kept my options more open than that. I took Shulie to a near-by tea shop, though a somewhat superior tea shop. We were early, but it was filling fast. Still, we had a table to ourselves for a time.

'What's your name?'

'Shulie.'

Her lips were like dark rose petals, as one imagines them, or sometimes dreams of them.

*

I have mentioned how lamentably sure I am that I failed to make Celia happy; nor any other girl. During the war, I had lived, off and on, with a woman married to another officer, who was never there when I was. I shall not relate how for me it all began. There was a case for, and a case against, but it had been another relationship inconducive to the ultimate happiness of either party.

When I realised that I was not merely attracted by Shulie, but deeply in love with her, and dependent for any future I might have upon marrying her, I applied myself to avoiding past errors. Possibly in past circumstances, they had not really been errors; but now they might be the difference between life and death. I decided that, apart from my mother, I had never previously and properly loved anyone; and that with no one else but my mother had I been sufficiently honest to give things a chance. When the time came, I acted at once.

Within half an hour of Shulie tentatively accepting my proposal of marriage, I related to her what Mason had told me, and what I had myself seen. I said that I was a haunted man. I even said that she could reverse her tentative decision, if she thought fit.

'So the woman has to be let in?' said Shulie.

'That's what Mason told me.'

'A woman who is married does not let any other woman in, except when her husband is not there.'

'But suppose you were ill?'

'Then you would be at home looking after me. It would not be a time when you would let in another woman.'

It was obvious that she was not taking the matter seriously. I had been honest, but I was still anxious.

'Have you ever heard a story like it before?'

'Yes,' said Shulie. 'But it is the message that matters more than the messenger.'

*

After we married, Shulie simply moved into my small flat. At first we intended, or certainly I intended, almost immediately to start looking for somewhere much larger. We, or certainly I, had a family in mind. With Shulie, I wanted that very much, even though I was a haunted man, whose rights were doubtful.

But it was amazing how well we seemed to go on living exactly where we were. Shulie had few possessions to bring in, and even when they were increased, we still seemed to have plenty of room. It struck me that Shulie's slight infirmity might contribute to her lack of interest in that normal ambition of any woman: a larger home. Certainly, the trouble seemed at times to fatigue her, even though the manifestations were very inconspicuous. For example, Jack Oliver, at a much later date, denied that he had ever noticed anything at all. The firm had provided me with a nice car and parking was then easier than it is now. Shulie had to do little walking of the kind that really exhausts a woman; pushing through crowds, and round shops at busy hours.

As a matter of fact, Shulie seldom left the flat, unless in my company. Shulie was writing a book. She ordered almost all goods on the telephone, and proved to be skilful and firm. She surprised me continually in matters like that. Marriage had already changed her considerably. She was plumper, as well as more confident. She accompanied me to the Festival Hall, and to picnics in Kew Gardens. The picnics were made elegant and exciting by her presence, and by her choice of what we ate and drank, and by the way she looked at the flowers, and by the way people and flowers looked at her. Otherwise, she wrote, or mused upon what she was about to write. She reclined in different sets of silk pyjamas on a bright-blue daybed I'd bought for her, and rested her square, stiff-covered exercise book upon her updrawn knees. She refused to read to me what she had written, or to let me read it for myself. 'You will know one day,' she said.

I must admit that I had to do a certain amount of explaining to Jack Oliver. He would naturally have preferred me to marry a woman who kept open house and was equally good with all men alike. Fortunately, business in Britain does not yet depend so much upon those things as does business in America. I was able to tell Jack that setting a wife to attract business to her husband was always a chancy transaction for the husband. For better or for worse, Jack, having lately battled his way through a very complex divorce, accepted my view. The divorce had ended in a most unpleasant situation for Jack financially, as well as in some public ridicule. He was in no position even to hint that I had married a girl whom he had rejected for a job. His own wife had been the daughter of a baronet who was also a vice-admiral and a former Member of Parliament. Her name was Clarissa. Her mother, the admiral's wife, was an M.F.H.

After my own mother's death, I should never have thought possible the happiness that Shulie released in me. There was much that remained unspoken to the end, but that may have been advantageous. Perhaps it is always so. Perhaps only madmen need to know everything and thus to destroy everything. When I lay in Shulie's arms, or simply regarded her as she wrote her secret book, I wished to know nothing more, because more would diminish. This state of being used to be known as connubial bliss. Few, I believe, experience it. It is certainly not a matter of deserts.

Shulie, however, proved to be incapable of conception. Possibly it was a consequence of earlier sufferings and endurances. Elaborate treatments might have been tried, but Shulie shrank from them, and understandably. She accepted the situation very quietly. She did not seem to cease loving me. We continued to dwell in the flat off Orchard Street.

I asked Shulie when her book would be finished. She replied that the more she wrote, the more there was to be written. Whenever I approached her, she closed the excercise book and lifted herself up to kiss me. If I persisted at all, she did more than kiss me.

I wanted nothing else in life than to be with Shulie, and alone with her. Everything we did in the outside world was incorporated into our love. I was happy once more, and now I was happy all the time, even in the office near Cornhill. I bought a bicycle to make the journey, but the City men laughed, and nicknamed me, and ragged me, so that Jack Oliver and the others suggested that I give it up. Jack bought the bicycle himself, to use at his place in the country, where, not necessarily on the bicycle, he was courting the divorced daughter of the local High Sheriff, a girl far beyond his present means. She was even a member of a ladies' polo team, though the youngest. When one is happy oneself, everyone seems happy.

Our flat was on the top floor in a small block. The block had been built in more spacious days than the present, and there were two lifts. They were in parallel shafts. Above the waistline, the lifts had windows on three sides; the gate being on the fourth. They were large lifts, each *Licensed to carry 12 people;* far more than commonly accumulated at any one time. The users worked the lifts themselves, though, when I had first taken the flat, the lifts in Selfridges round the corner had still been worked by the famous pretty girls in breeches, among whom an annual competition was held. The two lifts in the flats were brightly lit and always very clean. Shulie loved going up and down in them; much as she loved real traffic blocks, with boys ranging along the stationary cars selling ice cream and evening newspapers. None the less, I do not think she used the lifts very much when I was not there. Travelling in them was, in fact, one tiny facet of our love. When Shulie was alone, I believe she commonly used the stairs, despite her

trouble. The stairs were well lit and well swept also. Marauders were seldom met.

Tenants used sometimes to wave to their neighbours through the glass, as the two lifts swept past one another, one upwards, one downwards. It was important to prevent this becoming a mere tiresome obligation. One morning I was alone in the descending lift. I was on my way to work: Bond Street Underground station to Bank Underground station. There had been a wonderful early morning with Shulie, and I was full of joy; thinking about nothing but that. The other lift swept upwards past me. In it were four people who lived in the flats, three women and one man; all known to me by sight, though no more than that. As a fifth, there was the woman whom I had seen when my mother died.

Despite the speed with which the lifts had passed, I was sure it was she. The back was turned to me, but her sparse hair, her dirty plaid, her stature, and somehow her stance, were for ever unmistakable. I remember thinking immediately that the others in the lift must all be seeing the woman's face.

Melted ice flowed through me from the top of my head to the soles of my feet. There was a device for stopping the lift: *To be used only in Emergency.* And of course I wanted to reverse the lift also. I was so cold and so shaky that I succeeded merely in jamming the lift, and neatly between floors, like a joke in *Puck* or *Rainbow,* or a play by Sartre.

I hammered and raved, but most of the tenants had either gone to work or were making preparations for coffee mornings. The other lift did not pass again. As many as ten minutes tore by before anyone took notice of me, and then it was only because our neighbour, Mrs. Delmer, wanted to descend from the top, and needed the lift she always used, being, as she had several times told us, frightened of the other one. The caretaker emerged slowly from his cubicle and shouted to me that there was nothing he could do. He would have to send for the lift company's maintenance men. He was not supposed to be on duty at that hour anyway, he said. We all knew that. Mrs. Delmer made a detour as she clambered down the staircase, in order to tap on the glass roof of my lift and give me a piece of her mind, though in refined phrases. In the end, I simply sank upon the floor and tried to close myself to all thought or feeling, though with no success.

I must acknowledge that the maintenance men came far sooner than one could have expected. They dropped from above, and crawled from below, even emerging from a trap in the lift floor, full of cheerful conversation, both particular and general. The lift was brought slowly down to the gate on the floor immediately below. For some reason, that gate would not open, even to the maintenance men; and we had to sink, slowly still, to the ground floor. The first thing I saw there was a liquid trail in from the street up to the gate of the other lift. Not being his hour, the caretaker had still to mop it up, even though it reeked of seabed mortality.

Shulie and I lived on the eighth floor. I ran all the way up. The horrible trail crossed our landing from the lift gate to under our front door.

I do not know how long I had been holding the key in my hand. As one does at such times, I fumbled and fumbled at the lock. When the door was open, I saw that the trail wound through the tiny hall or lobby and entered the living room. When the woman came to my mother, there had been a faint trail only, but at that time I had not learned from Mason about the woman coming from the sea. Fuller knowledge was yielding new evidence.

I did not find Shulie harmed, or ill, or dead. She was not there at all.

Everything was done, but I never saw her again.

IV

The trail of water soon dried out, leaving no mark of any kind, despite the rankness.

The four people whom I had seen in the lift, and who lived in the flats, denied that they had ever seen a fifth. I neither believed nor disbelieved.

Shulie's book was infinitely upsetting. It was hardly fiction at all, as I had supposed it to be, but a personal diary, in the closest detail, of everything we had done together, of everything we had been, of everything she had felt. It was at once comprehensive and chaste. At one time, I even thought of seeking a publisher for it, but was deterred, in an illogical way, by the uncertainty about what had happened to Shulie. I was aware that it had been

perfectly possible for her to leave the building by the staircase, while I had been caged between floors in the lift. The staircase went down a shaft of its own.

The book contained nothing of what had happened to Shulie before she met me.

Shulie's last words were, 'So joyful! Am I dreaming, or even dead? It seems that there is no external way of deciding either thing.' Presumably, she had then been interrupted. Doubtless, she had then risen to open the door.

I had been married to Shulie for three years and forty-one days.

*

I wrote to the Trustees suggesting that they put Pollaporra on the market, but their law agent replied that it was outside their powers. All I had done was upset both Cuddy and Mason.

I sold the lease of the flat off Orchard Street, and bought the lease of another one, off Gloucester Place.

I settled down to living with no one and for no one. I took every opportunity of travelling for the bank, no matter where, not only abroad, but even to Peterhead, Bolton, or Camborne. Previously, I had not wished or cared to leave Shulie for a single night.

I pursued new delights, such as they were, and as they came along. I joined a bridge club, a chess club, a mah-jong society, and a mixed fencing group. Later, I joined a very avant-garde dance club, and went there occasionally.

I was introduced by one of the people in my firm to a very High Anglican church in his own neighbourhood, and went there quite often. Sometimes I read one of the lessons. I was one of the few who could still do that in Latin.

Another partner was interested in masonics, but I thought that would be inconsistent. I did join a livery company: it is expected in the City.

I was pressed to go in for regular massage, but resisted that too.

I was making more paper money than I would ever have thought possible. Paper money? Not even that. Phantom wealth, almost entirely: taxes took virtually the whole of it. I did not even employ a housekeeper. I did not wish for the attentions of any woman who was not Shulie. All the same, I wrote to Celia, who replied at once, making clear, among very many other things, that she was still unmarried. She had time to write so long and so prompt a letter. She had hope enough to think it worth while.

It is amazing how full a life a man can lead without for one moment being alive at all, except sometimes when sleeping. As Clifford Bax says, life is best treated as simply a game. Soon enough one will be bowled middle stump, be put out of action in the scrum, or ruled offside and sent off. As Bax also says, it is necessary to have an alternative. But who really has?

None the less, blood will out, and I married again. Sometime before, Shulie's death had been 'presumed'. Mercifully, it was the Trustees who attended to that.

I married Clarissa. I am married to her now.

The Court had bestowed upon Clarissa a goodly slice of Jack's property and prospects, and Jack was recognised by all as having made a complete fool of himself, not only in the area of cash; but Clarissa never really left at all. Even though Jack was now deeply entangled with Suzanne, herself a young divorcée, Clarissa was always one of Jack's house party, eager to hear everything, ready to advise, perhaps even to comfort, though I myself never came upon her doing that. She might now be sleeping in the room that had once been set aside for the visits of her sister, Naomi, but of course she knew the whole house far more intimately than Jack did, or than any normal male knows any house. She continued being invaluable to Jack; especially when he was giving so much of his time to Suzanne. One could not know Jack at all well, let alone as well as I knew him, without continuing to encounter Clarissa all the time.

The word for Clarissa might be deft – the first word, that is. She can manage a man or a woman, a slow child or a slow pensioner, as effortlessly

as she can manage everything in a house, at a party, in a shop, on a ship. She has the small but right touch for every single situation – the perfect touch. Most of all, she has the small and perfect touch for every situation, huge or tiny, in her own life. Few indeed have *that* gift. No doubt Clarissa owes much to her versatile papa. On one occasion also, I witnessed Clarissa's mother looking after a difficult meet. It was something to note and remember.

Clarissa has that true beauty which is not so much in the features and body, but around them: nothing less than a mystical emanation. When I made my proposal to Clarissa, I naturally thought very devoutly of Shulie. Shulie's beauty was of the order one longs from the first to embrace, to be absorbed by. Of course, my mother's dark beauty had been like that also. Clarissa one hardly wished or dared to touch, lest the vision fade. A man who felt otherwise than that about Clarissa would be a man who could not see the vision at all I imagine that state of things will bear closely upon what happens to Clarissa. There is little that is mystical about Clarissa's detectable behaviour, though there must be *some* relationship between her soul and the way she looks. It is a question that arises so often when women as beautiful as Clarissa materialise in one's rose garden. I myself have never seen another woman as beautiful absolutely as Clarissa, or certainly never spoken to one.

Clarissa has eyes so deep as to make one wonder about the whole idea of depth, and what it means. She has a voice almost as lovely as her face. She has a slow and languorous walk: beautiful too, but related, I fear, to an incident during her early teens, when she broke both legs in the hunting field. Sometimes it leads to trouble when Clarissa is driving a car. Not often. Clarissa prefers to wear trousers, though she looks perfectly normal in even a short skirt, indeed divinely beautiful, as always.

I fear that too much of my life with Clarissa has been given to quarrelling. No one is to blame, of course.

There was a certain stress even at the proposal scene, which took place on a Saturday afternoon in Jack's house, when the others were out shooting duck. Pollaporra and its legend have always discouraged me from field sports,

and all the struggling about had discouraged Clarissa, who sat before the fire, looking gnomic.

But she said yes at once, and nodded, and smiled.

Devoted still, whether wisely or foolishly, to honesty, I told her what Mason had told me, and what I had myself seen on two occasions, and that I was a haunted man.

Clarissa looked very hostile. 'I don't believe in things like that,' she said sharply.

'I thought I ought to tell you.'

'Why? Did you want to upset me?'

'Of course not. I love you. I don't want you to accept me on false pretences.'

'It's got nothing to do with my accepting you. I just don't want to know about such things. They don't exist.'

'But they do, Clarissa. They are part of me.'

From one point of view, obviously I should not have persisted. I had long recognised that many people would have said that I was obsessed. But the whole business seemed to me the explanation of my being. Clarissa must not take me to be merely a banker, a youngish widower, a friend of her first husband's, a faint simulacrum of the admiral.

Clarissa actually picked up a book of sweepstake tickets and threw it at me as I sat on the rug at her feet.

'There,' she said.

It was a quite thick and heavy book, but I was not exactly injured by it, though it had come unexpectedly, and had grazed my eye.

Clarissa then leaned forward and gave me a slow and searching kiss. It was the first time we had kissed so seriously.

'There,' she said again.

She then picked the sweepstake tickets off the floor and threw them in the fire. They were less than fully burnt ten minutes later, when Clarissa and I were more intimately involved, and looking at our watches to decide when the others were likely to return.

*

The honeymoon, at Clarissa's petition, was in North Africa, now riddled with politics, which I did not care for. For centuries, there has been very little in North Africa for an outsider to see, and the conformity demanded by an alien society seemed not the best background for learning to know another person. Perhaps we should have tried Egypt, but Clarissa specifically demanded something more rugged. With Shulie there had been no honeymoon.

Before marrying me, Clarissa had been dividing her life between her flat and Jack's country house. Her spacious flat, very near my childhood home, was in its own way as beautiful as she was, and emitted a like glow. It would have been absurd for me not to move into it. The settlement from Jack had contributed significantly to all around me, but by now I was able to keep up, or nearly so. Money is like sex. The more that everyone around is talking of little else, the less it really accounts for, let alone assists.

Not that sex has ever been other than a problem with Clarissa. I have good reason to believe that others have found the same, though Jack never gave me one word of warning. In any case, his Suzanne is another of the same kind, if I am any judge; though less beautiful, and, I should say, less kind also. Men chase the same women again and again; or rather the same illusion; or rather the same lost part of themselves.

Within myself, I had of course returned to the hope of children. Some will say that I was a fool not to have had that matter out with Clarissa before marrying her, and no doubt a number of related matters also. They speak without knowing Clarissa. No advance terms can be set. None at all. I doubt whether it is possible with any woman whom one finds really desirable. Nor can the proposal scene be converted into a businesslike discussion of future

policy and prospects. That is not the atmosphere, and few would marry if it were.

With Shulie, the whole thing had been love. With Clarissa, it was power; and she was so accustomed to the power being hers that she could no longer bother to exercise it, except indirectly. This was and is true even though Clarissa is exceedingly good-hearted in many other ways. I had myself experienced something of the kind in reverse with poor Celia, though obviously in a much lesser degree.

Clarissa has long been impervious to argument or importunity or persuasion of any kind. She is perfectly equipped with counterpoise and equipoise. She makes discussion seem absurd. Almost always it is. Before long, I was asking myself whether Clarissa's strange and radiant beauty was compatible with desire, either on her part or on mine.

There was also the small matter of Clarissa's black maid, Aline, who has played her little part in the immediate situation. On my visits to the flat before our marriage, I had become very much aware of Aline, miniature and slender, always in tight sweater and pale trousers. Clarissa had told me that Aline could do everything in the place that required to be done; but in my hearing Aline spoke little for herself. I was told that often she drove Clarissa's beautiful foreign car, a present from Jack less than a year before the divorce. I was also told, as a matter of interest, that Jack had never met Aline. I therefore never spoke of her to him. I was telling him much less now, in any case. I certainly did not tell him what I had not previously told myself: that when I was away for the firm, which continued to be frequently, Aline took my place in Clarissa's vast and swanlike double bed. I discovered this in a thoroughly low way, which I do not propose to relate. Clarissa simply remarked to me that, as I knew, she could never sleep well if alone in the room. I abstained from rejoining that what Clarissa really wanted was a nanny; one of those special nannies who, like dolls, are always there to be dominated by their charges. It would have been one possible rejoinder.

Nannies were on my mind. It had been just then that the Trustees wrote to me about Cuddy. They told me that Cuddy had 'intimated a wish' to leave her employment at Pollaporra. She wanted to join her younger sister, who, I

was aware, had a business on the main road, weaving and plaiting for the tourists, not far from Dingwall. I could well believe that the business had become more prosperous than when I had heard about it as a child. It was a business of the sort that at the moment did. The Trustees went on to imply that it was my task, and not theirs, to find a successor to Cuddy. They reminded me that I was under an obligation to maintain a property in which I had merely a life interest.

It was a very hot day. Clarissa always brought the sun. She had been reading the letter over my shoulder. I was aware of her special nimbus encircling my head and torso when she did this. Moreover, she was wearing nothing but her nightdress.

'Let's go and have a look,' she said.

'Are you sure you want to?' I asked, remembering her response to my story.

'Of course I'm sure. I'll transform the place, now I've got it to myself.'

'That'll be the day,' I said, smiling up at her.

'You won't know it when I've finished with it. Then we can sell it.'

'We can't,' I said. 'Remember it's not mine to sell.'

'You must get advice. Jack might be able to help.'

'You don't know what Pollaporra's like. Everything is bound to be totally run down.'

'With your Cuddy in charge all these years, and with nothing else to do with herself? At least, you say not.'

I had seen on my previous visit that this argument might be sound, as far as it went.

'You can't possibly take on all the work.'

'We'll have Aline with us. I had intended that.'

By now, I had seen for myself also that Aline was indeed most competent and industrious. It would have been impossible to argue further: Clarissa was my wife and had a right both to accompany me and to take someone with her to help with the chores. If I were to predecease her, she would have a life interest in the property. Moreover, Clarissa alone could manage very well for us when she applied herself. I had learned that too. There were no sensible, practical objections whatever.

'Aline will be a help with the driving as well,' added Clarissa.

There again, I had seen for myself how excellent a driver little Aline could be. She belongs to just the sort of quiet person who in practice drives most effectively on the roads of today.

'So write at once and say we're arriving,' said Clarissa.

'I'm not sure there's anyone to write to,' I replied. 'That's the point.'

I had, of course, a set of keys. For whatever reason, I did not incline to giving Mason advance notice of my second coming, and in such altered circumstances.

'I'm not sure how Aline will get on with the Highlanders,' I remarked. There are, of course, all those stories in Scotland about the intrusion of huge black men, and sometimes, I fancy, of black females. They figure in folklore everywhere.

'She'll wind each of them three times round each of her fingers,' replied Clarissa. 'But you told me there *were* no Highlanders at Pollaporra.'

Clarissa, when triumphing, looks like Juno, or Diana, or even Minerva.

Aline entered to the tinkling of a little bell. It is a pretty little bell, which I bought for Clarissa in Sfax; her earlier little bell having dropped its clapper. When Aline entered in her quiet way, Clarissa kissed her, as she does every morning upon first sighting Aline.

'We're all three going into the wilderness together,' said Clarissa. 'Probably on Friday.'

Friday was the day after tomorrow. I really could not leave the business for possibly a week at such short notice. There was some tension because of that, but it could not be helped.

*

When we did reach Pollaporra, the weather was hotter than ever, though there had been several thunderstorms in London. Aline was in her element. Clarissa had stocked up the large car with food in immense quantity. When we passed through an outlying area of Glasgow, she distributed two pounds of sweets to children playing in the roads of a council estate. The sweets were melting in their papers as she threw them. The tiny fingers locked together.

When we reached the small kirkyard, Clarissa, who was driving us along the rough road from Arrafergus, categorically refused to stop.

'We're here to drive the bogies out,' she said, 'not to let them in.'

Clarissa also refused to leave the car at the bottom of the final slope, as Perry Jesperson had done. My friend Jesperson was now a Labour M.P. like his father, and already a Joint Parliamentary Secretary, and much else, vaguely lucrative and responsible. Clarissa took the car up the very steep incline as if it had been a lift at the seaside.

She stood looking at and beyond the low grey house. 'Is that the sea?' she asked, pointing.

'It's the sea loch,' I replied. 'A long inlet, like a fjord.'

'It's a lovely place,' said Clarissa.

I was surprised, but, I suppose, pleased.

'I thought we might cut the house up into lodges for the shooting and fishing,' said Clarissa. 'But now I don't want to.'

'The Trustees would never have agreed,' I pointed out. 'They have no power to agree.'

'Doesn't matter. I want to come here often. Let's take a photograph.'

So, before we started to unpack the car, Clarissa took one of Aline and me; and, at her suggestion, I took one of Aline and her. Aline did not rise to the shoulders of either of us.

Within the house, the slight clamminess of my previous visit had been replaced by a curiously tense airlessness. I had used my key to admit us, but I had not been certain as to whether or not Cuddy was already gone, and Clarissa and I went from room to room shouting for her, Clarissa more loudly than I. Aline remained among the waders and antlers of the entrance hall, far from home, and thinking her own thoughts. There was no reply anywhere. I went to the door of what I knew to be Cuddy's own room, and quietly tapped. When there was no reply there either, I gently tried the handle. I thought the door might be locked, but it was not. Inside was a small unoccupied bedroom. The fittings were very spare. There were a number of small framed statements on the walls, such as *I bow before Thee,* and *Naught but Surrender,* and *Who knows All* without a mark of interrogation. Clarissa was still calling from room to room. I did not care to call back but went after her on half-tiptoe.

I thought we could conclude we were alone. Cuddy must have departed some time ago.

Dust was settling everywhere, even in that remote spot. The sunlight made it look like encroaching fur. Clarissa seemed undeterred and undaunted.

'It's a lost world and I'm queen,' she said.

It is true that old grey waders, and wicker fish baskets with many of the withies broken, and expensive guns for stalking lined up in racks, are unequalled for suggesting loss, past, present, and to come. Even the pictures were all of death and yesterday – stags exaggeratedly virile before the crack shot; feathers abnormally bright before the battue; men and ancestors in bonnets before, behind, and around the ornamentally piled carcases, with

the lion of Scotland flag stuck in the summit. When we reached the hall, I noticed that Aline was shuddering in the sunlight. I myself had never been in the house before without Cuddy. In practice, she had been responsible for everything that happened there. Now I was responsible – and for as long as I remained alive.

'We'll paint everything white and we'll put in a swimming pool,' cried Clarissa joyously. 'Aline can have the room in the tower.'

'I didn't know there was a tower,' I said.

'*Almost* a tower,' said Clarissa.

'Is there anything in the room?' I asked.

'Only those things on heads. They're all over the walls and floor.'

At that, Aline actually gave a little cry. Perhaps she was thinking of things on walls and floors in Africa.

'It's all right,' said Clarissa, going over to her. 'We'll throw them all away. I promise. I never ask you to do anything I don't do myself, or wouldn't do.'

But, whatever might be wrong, Aline was uncomforted. 'Look!' she cried, and pointed out through one of the hall windows, all of them obstructed by stuffed birds in glass domes, huge and dusty.

'What have you seen this time?' asked Clarissa, as if speaking to a loved though exhausting child.

At that moment, it came to me that Clarissa regularly treated Aline as my mother had treated me.

Aline's hand fell slowly to her side, and her head began to droop.

'It's only the car,' said Clarissa. '*Our* car. You've been driving it yourself.'

I had stepped swiftly but quietly behind the two of them. I admit that I too could see nothing but the car, and, of course, the whole of Scotland.

I seldom spoke directly to Aline, but now was the moment.

'What was it?' I asked, as sympathetically as I could manage. 'What did you see?'

But Aline had begun to weep, as by now I had observed that she often did. She wept without noise or any special movement. The tears just flowed like thawing snow; as they do in nature, though less often on 'Change.

'It was nothing,' said Clarissa. 'Aline often sees nothing, don't you, Aline?' She produced her own handkerchief, and began to dry Aline's face, and to hug her tightly.

The handkerchief was from an enormous casket of objects given us as a wedding present by Clarissa's grandmother (on the mother's side), who was an invalid, living in Dominica. Clarissa's grandfather had been shot dead years before by thieves he had interrupted.

'Now,' said Clarissa after a few moments of tender reassurance. 'Smile, please. That's better. We're going to be happy here, one and all. Remember. Happy.'

I suppose I was reasonably eager, but I found it difficult to see how she was going to manage it. It was not, as I must in justice to her make clear, that normally I was unhappy with Clarissa. She was too beautiful and original for that to be the word at any time. The immediate trouble was just Pollaporra itself: the most burdensome and most futile of houses, so futile as to be sinister, even apart from its associations, where I was concerned. I could not imagine any effective brightening; not even by means of maquillage and disguise: a pool, a discothèque, a sauna, a black-jack suite. To me Pollaporra was a millstone I could never throw away. I could not believe that modern tenants would ever stop there for long, or in the end show us a profit. For all the keep nets and carcase sleighs in every room, I doubted whether the accessible sport was good enough to be marketed at all in contemporary terms. Nor had I started out with Clarissa in order that we should settle down in the place ourselves. When I can get away from work, I want somewhere recuperative. About Pollaporra, I asked the question all

married couples ask when detached from duties and tasks: what should we do all day? There was nothing.

'I have never felt so free and blithe,' said Clarissa later that evening, exaggerating characteristically but charmingly. She was playing the major part in preparing a quite elaborate dinner for us out of tins and packets. In the flat, Aline had normally eaten in her own pretty sitting room, but here she would be eating with us. Clarissa would be tying a lace napkin round her neck, and heaping her plate with first choices, and handing her date after date on a spike. Employees are supposed to be happier when treated in that way, though few people think it is true, and few employees.

'We'll flatten the roof and have li-los,' said Clarissa, while Aline munched with both eyes on her plate, and I confined myself to wary nibblings round the fringe of Rognons Turbigo, canned but reinvigorated. The plates at Pollaporra depicted famous Scots, such as Sawney Bean and Robert Knox, who employed Burke and Hare, the body-snatchers. Mr. Justice Leith, who despised the criminal law, had never been above such likenesses, as we know; not had he been the only sporting jurist in the family, very far from it.

'I think to do that we'd have to rebuild the house,' I remarked.

'Do try not to make difficulties the whole time. Let yourself go, Brodick.'

It is seldom a good idea, according to my experience, and especially not in Scotland, but of course I could see what Clarissa meant. There was no reason why we should not make of the trip as much of a holiday as was possible. It would be a perfectly sensible thing to do. If Clarissa was capable of fun at Pollaporra, I was the last person with a right to stand in her way.

'We might build a gazebo,' I said, though I could feel my heart sinking as I spoke.

Aline, with her mouth full of prunes (that day), turned her head towards me. She did not know what a gazebo was.

'A sort of summerhouse,' explained Clarissa. 'With cushions and views. It would be lovely. So many things to look at.'

I had never known Clarissa so simple-minded before; in the nicest sense, of course. I realised that this might be a Clarissa more real than the other one. I might have to consider where I myself stood about that. On the other hand, Pollaporra, instead of bringing out at long last the real woman, might be acting upon her by contraries, and have engaged the perversity in her, and to no ultimately constructive end. I had certainly heard of that too, and in my time seen it in action among friends.

'I don't want to look,' said Aline, expelling prune stones into spoons.

'You will by tomorrow. You'll feel quite different. We're going to drive all the banshees far, far away.'

I am sure that Aline did not know what a banshee was either, but Clarissa's general meaning was clear, and the word has an African, self-speaking sound in itself, when one comes to think about it. Words for things like that are frightening in themselves the world over.

Only Clarissa, who believed in nothing she could not see or imagine, was utterly undisturbed. I am sure that must have played its part in the row we had in our room that night.

There were small single rooms, of course, several of them. There were also low dormitories for body servants and sporting auxiliaries. All the rooms for two people had Scottish double beds. Clarissa and I had to labour away in silence making such a bed with sheets she had brought with us. Blankets we should have had to find in drawers and to take on trust, but on such a night they were unnecessary. Aline, when not with Clarissa, always slept in a striped bag, which that night must have been far too hot. Everything, everywhere, was far too hot. That contributed too, as it always does. Look at Latin America!

I admit that throughout the evening I had failed to respond very affirmatively to Clarissa's sequence of suggestions for livening up the property and also (she claimed) increasing its market value; which, indeed,

cannot, as things were and are, be high. I could see for myself how I was leading her first into despondency, then into irritation. I can see that only too well now. I was dismayed by what was happening, but there was so little I could conscientiously offer in the way of encouragement. All I wished to do with Pollaporra was patch up some arrangement to meet my minimum obligations as a life tenant, and then, if possible, never set eyes upon the place again. One reason why I was cast down was the difficulty of achieving even a programme as basic as that. I daresay that Clarissa's wild ideas would actually be simpler to accomplish, and conceivably cheaper also in the end. But there is something more than reason that casts me down at Pollaporra. Shall I say that the house brings into consciousness the conflict between my heraditament and my identity? Scotland herself is a land I do well to avoid. Many of us have large areas of danger which others find merely delightful.

There was no open row until Clarissa and I went upstairs. One reason was that after doing the washing-up, Aline had come into the sitting room, without a word, to join us. I was not surprised that she had no wish to be alone; nor that she proved reluctant to play a game named Contango, of which Clarissa was very fond, and which went back to her days with Jack, even though Jack had always won, sometimes while glancing through business papers simultaneously, as I had observed for myself. Both Clarissa and Aline were wearing tartan trousers, though not the same tartan. I had always been told by Cuddy that there was no Leith tartan. I have never sought further to know whether or not that is true.

As soon as we were in bed, Clarissa lay on her front, impressing the pillow with moisture from her brow, and quietly set about me; ranging far beyond the possibilities and deficiencies of Pollaporra. Any man – any modern man – would have some idea of what was said. Do the details matter? I offered no argument. At Pollaporra, I spoke as little as I could. What can argument achieve anywhere? It might have been a moment for me to establish at least temporary dominance by one means or another, but Pollaporra prevented, even if I am the man to do it at any time. I tried to remember Shulie, but of course the circumstances left her entirely unreal to me, together with everything else.

And, in the morning, things were no better. I do not know how much either of us had managed to sleep. For better or worse, we had fallen silent in the heat long ago. In the end, I heard the seabirds screaming and yelling at the dawn.

Clarissa put on a few garments while I lay silent on the bed and then told me that as there was nothing she could do in the house, she was departing at once.

'I should leave Aline behind, but I need her.'

'I quite understand,' I said. 'I advised you against coming in the first place. I shall go over to see Mason and try to arrange with him for a caretaker. It won't take more than a day or two.'

'You'll first need to change the place completely. You are weak and pigheaded.'

'They sometimes see things differently in Scotland. I shall come down as soon as I can.' I might have to hire a car to some station, because I did not think Mason owned one, or anyone else in his small community. That was a trifle; comparatively.

'No hurry. I shall use the time deciding what to do for the best.' She was combing her mass of hair, lovely as Ceres' sheaf. The comb, given her by the Aga Khan, was made of ebony. The air smelled of hot salt.

I suppose I should have begged her pardon for Pollaporra and myself, and gone back to London with her, or to anywhere else. I did not really think of it. Pollaporra had to be settled, if at all possible. I might never be back there.

In a few moments, Clarissa and I were together in the hall, the one high room, and I saw Aline silently standing by the outer door, as if she had stood all night; and the door was slightly open. Aline was in different trousers, and so was Clarissa.

'I can't be bothered to pack up the food. You're welcome to all of it.'

'Don't go without breakfast,' I said. 'The lumpy roads will make you sick.'

'Breakfast would make me sick,' said Clarissa.

Clarissa carried very few clothes about. All she had with her was in the aircraft holdall she clutched. I do not know about Aline. She must have had something. I cannot remember.

'I don't know when we'll meet again,' said Clarissa.

'In two or three days,' I said. 'Four at the most.' Since I had decided to remain, I had to seem calm.

'I may go and stay with Naomi. I want to think things out.'

She was wearing the lightest of blouses, little more than a mist. She was exquisite beyond description. Suddenly, I noticed that tears were again streaming silently down Aline's face.

'Or I may go somewhere else,' said Clarissa, and walked out, with her slight but distinctive wobble.

Instead of immediately following her, as she always did, Aline actually took two steps in my direction. She looked up at me, like a rococo cherub. Since I could not kiss Clarissa, I lightly kissed Aline's wet lips, and she kissed me.

*

I turned my back in order not to see the car actually depart, though nothing could prevent my hearing it. What had the row been really about? I could surmise and guess, but I did not know. I much doubted whether Clarissa knew. One could only be certain that she would explain herself, as it were to a third party, in a totally different way from me. We might just as well belong to different zoological species, as in the Ray Bradbury story. The row was probably a matter only of Clarissa being a woman and I a man. Most of all, rows between the sexes have no more precise origin; and, indirectly, many other rows also.

I think I stood for some time with my back to the open door and my face to the picture of an old gillie in a tam, with dead animals almost to his knees. It had been given us by the Shepstones. It was named *Coronach* in Ruskinian letters, grimly misapplied. Ultimately, I turned and through the open door saw what Aline may have seen. The auld carlin was advancing across the drive with a view to entering.

Drive, I have to call it. It was a large area of discoloured nothingness upon which cars stood, and before them horses, but little grew, despite the lack of weeding. Needless to say, the woman was not approaching straightforwardly. Previously, I had seen her only when she had been confined to the limits of a staircase, albeit a wide one, a landing, and, later, a lift. If now she had been coming straight at me, I might have had a split second to see her face. I realised that, quite clearly, upon the instant.

I bounded forward. I slammed the door. The big key was difficult to turn in the big lock, so I shot the four rusty bolts first. Absurdly, there was a 'chain' also and, after I had coped with the stiff lock, I 'put it on.'

Then I tore round the house shooting other bolts; making sure that all other locks were secure; shutting every possible window and aperture, on that already very hot early morning.

*

It is amazing how much food Clarissa laid in. She was, or is, always open-handed. I am sure that I have made that clear. Nor of course does one need so much food – or at least want so much – in this intense heat. Nor as yet has the well run dry. Cuddy refused to show me the well, saying the key was lost. I have still not seen either thing.

There is little else to do but write this clear explanation of everything that has happened to me since the misfortune of birth. He that has fared better, and without deceiving himself, let him utter his jackass cry.

Not that I have surrendered. There lies the point. Pollaporra is not on the telephone, nor ever could be, pending the 'withering away of the State'; but before long someone may take note that I am not there. The marines may

descend from choppers yet. Clarissa may well have second thoughts. Women commonly do, when left to themselves. She loves Pollaporra and may well devise a means of wrestling my life interest away from me, and welcome. I don't know where Aline would enter into that hypothesis. Possibly I made a mistake in not writing to Mason that I was coming. But I doubt whether in such personal matters his time-scale is shorter than months.

Off and on, I see the woman at one window or another; though not peeking through, which, as will have been gathered, is far from her policy. At least twice, however, it has been at a window upstairs; on both occasions when I was about to undress for some reason, not necessarily slumber, of which I have little. At these times, her slimy-sleek head, always faceless, will tip-tap sharply against the thick glazing bars. The indelicacy, as Jack might put it (I wonder how Cuddy would put it?), set me upon a course of hard thinking.

So long as I keep myself barred up, she can achieve nothing. Mason seemed quite certain of that, and I accept it. But what does the woman aim to do to me? When she appeared to me before, my poor mother soon passed away. When she appeared to me a second time, my dear, dear Shulie vanished from my life. It is not to be taken for granted that either of these precise fates is intended for me. I am not even ill or infirm. There may be a certain room for manœuvre, though I can foresee no details.

More often, I see the woman at corners of what used to be the lawn and garden, though never in my time. It lies at the back of the house, and far below lies the loch. Sometimes too, the creature perches on the ornaments and broken walls, like a sprite. Such levitations are said to be not uncommon in the remoter parts of Scotland. Once I thought I glimpsed her high up in a bush, like dirty rags in a gale. Not that so far there has been any gale, or even any wind. The total silent stillness is one of the worst things. If I die of heat and deoxygenation, it will be one solution.

Yes, it is a battle with strong and unknown forces that I have on my hands. 'But what can ail all of them to bury the old carlin in the night time?' as Sir Walter ventures to enquire; in *The Antiquary,* if I remember rightly.

The Stains (1980)

After Elizabeth ultimately died, it was inevitable that many people should come forward with counsel, and doubtless equally inevitable that the counsel be so totally diverse.

There were two broad and opposed schools.

The first considered that Stephen should 'treasure the memory' (though it was not always put like that) for an indefinite period, which, it was implied, might conveniently last him out to the end of his own life. These people attached great importance to Stephen 'not rushing anything*. The second school urged that Stephen marry again as soon as he possibly could. They said that, above all, he must not just fall into apathy and let his life slide. They said he was a man made for marriage and all it meant.

Of course, both parties were absolutely right in every way. Stephen could see that perfectly well.

It made little difference. Planning, he considered, would be absurd in any case. Until further notice, the matter would have to be left to fate. The trouble was, of course, that fate's possible options were narrowing and dissolving almost weekly, as they had already been doing throughout Elizabeth's lengthy illness. For example (the obvious and most pressing example): how many women would want to marry Stephen now? A number, perhaps; but not a number that he would want to marry. Not after Elizabeth. That in particular.

They told him he should take a holiday, and he took one. They told him he should see his doctor, and he saw him. The man who had looked after Elizabeth had wanted to emigrate, had generously held back while Elizabeth had remained alive, and had then shot off at once. The new man was half-Sudanese, and Stephen found him difficult to communicate with, at least upon a first encounter, at least on immediate topics.

In the end, Stephen applied for and obtained a spell of compassionate leave, and went, as he usually did, to stay with his elder brother, Harewood, in the north. Harewood was in orders: the Reverend Harewood Hooper BD, MA. Their father and grandfather had been in orders too, and had been incumbents of that same small church in that same small parish for thirty-nine years and forty-two years respectively. So far, Harewood had served for only twenty-three years. The patron of the living, a private individual, conscientious and very long lived, was relieved to be able to rely upon a succession of such dedicated men. Unfortunately, Harewood's own son, his one child, had dropped out, and was now believed to have disappeared into Nepal. Harewood himself cared more for rock growths than for controversies about South Africa or for other such fashionable church preoccupations. He had published two important books on lichens. People often came to see him on the subject. He was modestly famous.

He fostered lichens on the flagstones leading up to the rectory front door; on the splendidly living stone walls, here grey stone, there yellow; even in the seldom used larders and pantries; assuredly on the roof, which, happily, was of stone slabs also.

As always when he visited his brother, Stephen found that he was spending much of his time out of doors; mainly, being the man he was, in long, solitary walks across the heathered uplands. This had nothing to do with Harewood's speciality. Harewood suffered badly from bronchitis and catarrh, and nowadays went out as little as possible. The domestic lichens, once introduced, required little attention - only observation.

Rather it was on account of Harewood's wife, Harriet, that Stephen roamed; a lady in whose company Stephen had never been at ease. She had always seemed to him a restless woman; jumpy and puzzling; the very reverse of all that had seemed best about Elizabeth. A doubtful asset, Stephen would have thought, in a diminishing rural parish; but Stephen himself, in a quiet and unobtruding way, had long been something of a sceptic. Be that as it might, he always found that Harriet seemed to be baiting and fussing him, not least when her husband was present; even, unforgivably, when Elizabeth, down in London, had been battling through her last dreadful

years. On every visit, therefore, Stephen wandered about for long hours in the open, even when ice was in the air and snow on the tenuous tracks.

But Stephen did not see it as a particular hardship. Elizabeth, who might have done - though, for his sake, she could have been depended upon to conceal the fact - had seldom come on these visits at any time. She had never been a country girl, though fond of the sea. Stephen positively liked wandering unaccompanied on the moors, though he had little detailed knowledge of their flora and fauna, or even of their archaeology, largely industrial and fragmentary. By now he was familiar with most of the moorland routes from the rectory and the village; and, as commonly happens, there was one that he preferred to all the others, and nowadays found himself taking almost without having to make a decision. Sometimes even, asleep in his London flat that until just now had been their London flat, he found himself actually dreaming of that particular soaring trail, though he would have found it difficult to define what properties of beauty or poetry or convenience it had of which the other tracks had less. According to the map, it led to a spot named Burton's Clough.

There was a vague valley or extended hollow more or less in the place which the map indicated, but to Stephen it seemed every time too indefinite to be marked out for record. Every time he wondered whether this was indeed the place; whether there was not some more decisive declivity that he had never discovered. Or possibly the name derived from some event in local history. It was the upwards walk to the place that appealed to Stephen, and, to an only slightly lesser extent, the first part of the slow descent homewards, supposing that the rectory could in any sense be called home: never the easily attainable but inconclusive supposed goal, the Clough. Of course there was always R. L. Stevenson's travelling hopefully to be inwardly quoted; and on most occasions hitherto Stephen had inwardly quoted it.

Never had there been any human being at, near, or visible from the terrain around Burton's Clough, let alone in the presumptive clough itself. There was no apparent reason why there should be. Stephen seldom met anyone at all on the moors. Only organizations go any distance afoot nowadays, and this was not an approved didactic district. All the work of agriculture is for

a period being done by machines. Most of the cottages are peopled by transients. Everyone is supposed to have a car.

But that morning, Stephen's first in the field since his bereavement six weeks before, there was someone, and down at the bottom of the shallow clough itself. The person was dressed so as to be almost lost in the hues of autumn, plainly neither tripper nor trifler. The person was engaged in some task.

Stephen was in no state for company, but that very condition, and a certain particular reluctance that morning to return to the rectory before he had to, led him to advance further, not descending into the clough but skirting along the ridge to the west of it, where, indeed, his track continued.

If he had been in the Alps, his shadow might have fallen in the early autumn sun across the figure below, but in the circumstances that idea would have been fanciful, because, at the moment, the sun was no more than a misty bag of gleams in a confused sky. None the less, as Stephen's figure passed, comparatively high above, the figure below glanced up at him.

Stephen could see that it was the figure of a girl. She was wearing a fawn shirt and pale green trousers, but the nature of her activity remained uncertain.

Stephen glanced away, then glanced back.

She seemed still to be looking up at him, and suddenly he waved to her, though it was not altogether the kind of thing he normally did. She waved back at him. Stephen even fancied she smiled at him. It seemed quite likely. She resumed her task.

He waited for an instant, but she looked up no more. He continued on his way more slowly, and feeling more alive, even if only for moments. For those moments, it had been as if he still belonged to the human race, to the mass of mankind.

Only once or twice previously had he continued beyond the top of Burton's Clough, and never for any great distance. On the map (it had been his father's map), the track wavered on across a vast area of nothing very much, merely contour lines and occasional habitations with odd, possibly evocative, names: habitations which, as Stephen knew from experience, regularly proved, when approached, to be littered ruins or not to be detectable at all. He would not necessarily have been averse from the twelve or fourteen miles solitary walk involved, at least while Elizabeth had been secure and alive, and at home in London; but conditions at the rectory had never permitted so long an absence. Harriet often made clear that she expected her guests to be present punctually at all meals and punctually at such other particular turning points of a particular day as the day itself might define.

On the present occasion, and at the slow pace into which he had subsided, Stephen knew that he should turn back within the next ten to fifteen minutes; but he half-understood that what he was really doing was calculating the best time for a second possible communication with the girl he had seen in the clough. If he reappeared too soon, he might be thought, at such a spot, to be pestering, even menacing; if too late, the girl might be gone. In any case, there was an obvious limit to the time he could give to such approach as might be possible.

As the whole matter crystallized within him, he turned on the instant. There was a stone beside the track at the point where he did it; perhaps aforetime a milepost, at the least a waymark. Its location seemed to justify his action. He noticed that it too was patched with lichen. When staying with Harewood, he always noticed; and more and more at other times too.

One might almost have thought that the girl had been waiting for him. She was standing at much the same spot, and looking upwards abstractedly. Stephen saw that beside her on the ground was a grey receptacle. He had not noticed it before, because its vague colour sank into the landscape, as did the girl herself, costumed as she was. The receptacle seemed to be half-filled with grey contents of some kind.

As soon as he came into her line of sight, and sometime before he stood immediately above her, the girl spoke.

'Are you lost? Are you looking for someone? '

She must have had a remarkably clear voice, because her words came floating up to Stephen like bubbles in water.

He continued along the ridge towards her while she watched him. Only when he was directly above her did he trust his own words to reach her.

'No. I'm really just filling in time. Thank you very much.'

'If you go on to the top, there's a spring.'

'I should think you have to have it pointed out to you. With all this heather.'

She looked down for a moment, then up again. 'Do you live here?'

'No. I'm staying with my brother. He's the rector. Perhaps you go to his church?'

She shook her head. 'No. We don't go to any church.'

That could not be followed up, Stephen felt, at his present distance and altitude. 'What are you doing?' he asked. 'Collecting stones for my father.'

'What does he do with them?'

'He wants the mosses and lichens.'

'Then,' cried Stephen, 'you *must* know my brother. Or your father must know him. My brother is one of the great authorities on lichens.' This unexpected link seemed to open a door; and, at least for a second, to open it surprisingly wide.

Stephen found himself bustling down the rough but not particularly steep slope towards her.

'My father's not an *authority*,' said the girl, gazing seriously at the descending figure. 'He's not an authority on anything.' 'Oh, you misunderstand,' said Stephen. 'My brother is only an amateur too. I didn't

mean he was a professor or anything like that. Still, I think your father must have heard of him.'

'I don't think so,' said the girl. 'I'm almost sure not.' Stephen had nearly reached the bottom of the shallow vale.

It was completely out of the wind down there, and surprisingly torrid.

'Let me see,' he said, looking into the girl's basket, before he looked at the girl.

She lifted the basket off the ground. Her hand and forearm were brown.

'Some of the specimens are very small,' he said, smiling. It was essential to keep the conversation going, and it was initially more difficult now that he was alone with her in the valley, and close to her.

'It's been a bad year,' she said. 'Some days I've found almost nothing. Nothing that could be taken home.'

'All the same, the basket must be heavy. Please put it down.' He saw that it was reinforced with stout metal strips, mostly rusty.

'Take a piece for yourself, if you like,' said the girl. She spoke as if they were portions of iced cake, or home-made coconut fudge.

Stephen gazed full at the girl. She had a sensitive face with grey-green eyes and short reddish hair - no, auburn. The *demode* word came to Stephen on the instant. Both her shirt and her trousers were worn and faded: familiar, Stephen felt. She was wearing serious shoes, but little cared for. She was a part of nature.

'I'll take this piece,' Stephen said. 'It's conglomerate.'

'Is it?' said the girl. Stephen was surprised that after so much ingathering, she did not know a fact so elementary.

'I might take this piece too, and show the stuff on it to my brother.'

'Help yourself,' said the girl. 'But don't take them all.'

Feeling had been building up in Stephen while he had been walking solitarily on the ridge above. For so long he had been isolated, insulated, incarcerated. Elizabeth had been everything to him, and no one could ever be like her, but 'attractive' was not a word that he had used to himself about her, not for a long time; not attractive as this girl was attractive. Elizabeth had been a part of him, perhaps the greater part of him; but not mysterious, not fascinating.

'Well, I don't know,' said Stephen. 'How far do you have to carry that burden?'

'The basket isn't full yet. I must go on searching for a bit.'

'I am sorry to say I can't offer to help. I have to go back.'

All the same, Stephen had reached a decision.

The girl simply nodded. She had not yet picked up the basket again.

'Where do you live?'

'Quite near.'

That seemed to Stephen to be almost impossible, but it was not the main point.

Stephen felt like a schoolboy; though not like himself as a schoolboy. 'If I were to be here after lunch tomorrow, say at half past two, would you show me the spring? The spring you were talking about.'

'Of course,' she said. 'If you like.'

Stephen could not manage the response so obviously needed, gently confident; if possible, even gently witty. For a moment, in fact, he could say nothing. Then - 'Look,' he said. He brought an envelope out of his pocket and in pencil on the back of it he wrote: 'Tomorrow. Here. 2.30 p.m. To visit the spring.'

He said, 'It's too big,' and tore one end off the envelope, aware that the remaining section bore his name, and that the envelope had been addressed to him care of his brother. As a matter of fact, it had contained the final communication from the undertaking firm. He wished they had omitted his equivocal and rather ridiculous OBE.

He held the envelope out. She took it and inserted it, without a word, into a pocket of her shirt, buttoning down the flap. Stephen's heart beat at the gesture.

He was not exactly sure what to make of the situation or whether the appointment was to be depended upon. But at such moments in life, one is often sure of neither thing, nor of anything much else.

He looked at her. 'What's your name?' he asked, as casually as he could.

'Nell,' she answered.

He had not quite expected that, but then he had not particularly expected anything else either.

'I look forward to our walk, Nell,' he said. He could not help adding, 'I look forward to it very much.'

She nodded and smiled.

He fancied that they had really looked at one another for a moment.

'I must go on searching,' she said.

She picked up the heavy basket, seemingly without particular effort, and walked away from him, up the valley.

Insanely, he wondered about her lunch. Surely she must have some? She seemed so exceptionally healthy and strong.

His own meal was all scarlet runners, but he had lost his appetite in any case, something that had never previously happened since the funeral, as he had noticed with surprise on several occasions.

Luncheon was called lunch, but the evening meal was none the less called supper, perhaps from humility. At supper that evening, Harriet referred forcefully to Stephen's earlier abstemiousness.

'I trust you're not sickening, Stephen. It would be a bad moment. Dr Gopalachari's on holiday. Perhaps I ought to warn you.'

'Dr Who?'

'No, not Dr Who. Dr Gopalachari. He's a West Bengali. We are lucky to have him.'

Stephen's brother, Harewood, coughed forlornly.

***

For luncheon the next day, Stephen had even less appetite, even though it was mashed turnip, cooked, or at least served, with mixed peppers. Harriet loved all things oriental.

On an almost empty stomach, he hastened up the long but not steep ascent. He had not known he could still walk so fast uphill, but for some reason the knowledge did not make him particularly happy, as doubtless it should have done.

The girl, dressed as on the day before, was seated upon a low rock at the spot from which he had first spoken to her. It was not yet twenty past. He had discerned her seated shape from afar, but she had proved to be sitting with her back to the ascending track and to him. On the whole, he was glad that she had not been watching his exertions, inevitably comical, albeit triumphant.

She did not even look up until he actually stood before her. Of course this time she had no basket.

'Oh, hullo,' she said.

He stood looking at her. 'We're both punctual.'

She nodded. He was panting quite strenuously, and glad to gain a little time.

He spoke. 'Did you find many more suitable stones?'

She shook her head, then rose to her feet.

He found it difficult not to stretch out his arms and draw her to him.

'Why is this called Burton's Clough, I wonder? It seems altogether too wide and shallow for a clough.'

'I didn't know it was,' said the girl.

'The map says it is. At least I think this is the place. Shall we go? Lead me to the magic spring.'

She smiled at him. 'Why do you call it thatV 'I'm sure it is magic. It must be.'

'It's just clear water,' said the girl, 'and very, very deep.' Happily, the track was still wide enough for them to walk side by side, though Stephen realized that, further on, where he had not been, this might cease to be the case.

'How long are you staying here?' asked the girl.

'Perhaps for another fortnight. It depends.'

'Are you married? '

'I *was* married, Nell, but my wife unfortunately died.' It seemed unnecessary to put any date to it, and calculated only to cause stress.

'I'm sorry,' said the girl.

'She was a wonderful woman and a very good wife.'

To that the girl said nothing. What could she say?

'I am taking a period of leave from the civil service,' Stephen volunteered. 'Nothing very glamorous.'

'What's the civil service? ' asked the girl.

'You ought to know *that*,' said Stephen in mock reproof: more or less mock. After all, she was not a child, or not exactly. All the same, he produced a childlike explanation. 'The civil service is what looks after the country. The country would hardly carry on without us. Not nowadays. Nothing would run properly.'

'Really not?'

'No. Not run *properly*.' With her it was practicable to be lightly profane.

'Father says that all politicians are evil. I don't know anything about it.'

'Civil servants are not politicians, Nell. But perhaps this is not the best moment to go into it all.' He said that partly because he suspected she had no wish to learn.

There was a pause.

'Do you like walking?' she asked.

'Very much. I could easily walk all day. Would you come with me?'

'I do walk all day, or most of it. Of course I have to sleep at night. I lie in front of the fire.'

'But it's too warm for a fire at this time of year.' He said it to keep the conversation going, but, in fact, he was far from certain. He himself was not particularly warm at that very moment. He had no doubt cooled off after speeding up the ascent, but the two of them were, none the less, walking reasonably fast, and still he felt chilly, perhaps perilously so.

'Father always likes a fire,' said the girl. 'He's a cold mortal.'

They had reached the decayed milestone or waymark at which Stephen had turned on the previous day. The girl had stopped and was fingering the lichens with which it was spattered. She knelt against the stone with her left arm round the back of it.

'Can you put a name to them? ' asked Stephen.

'Yes, to some of them.'

'I am sure your father has one of my brother's books on his shelf.'

'I don't think so,' said the girl. 'We have no shelves. Father can't read.'

She straightened up and glanced at Stephen.

'Oh, but surely—'

For example, and among other things, the girl herself was perfectly well spoken. As a matter of fact, hers was a noticeably beautiful voice. Stephen had noticed it, and even thrilled to it, when first he had heard it, floating up from the bottom of the so-called clough. He had thrilled to it ever since, despite the curious things the girl sometimes said.

They resumed their way.

'Father has no eyes,' said the girl.

'That is terrible,' said Stephen. 'I hadn't realized.'

The girl said nothing.

Stephen felt his first real qualm, as distinct from mere habitual self-doubt. 'Am I taking you away from him? Should you go back to him? '

'I'm never with him by day,' said the girl. 'He finds his way about.'

'I know that does happen,' said Stephen guardedly. 'All the same—'

'Father doesn't need a civil service to run him,' said the girl. The way she spoke convinced Stephen that she had known all along what the civil service was and did. He had from the first supposed that to be so. Everyone knew.

'You said your dead wife was a wonderful woman,' said the girl.

'Yes, she was.'

'My father is a wonderful man.'

'Yes,' said Stephen. 'I am only sorry about his affliction.'

'It's not an affliction,' said the girl.

Stephen did not know what to say to that. The last thing to be desired was an argument of any kind whatever, other perhaps than a fun argument.

'Father doesn't need to get things out of books,' said the girl.

'There are certainly other ways of learning,' said Stephen. 'I expect that was one of the things you yourself learned at school.'

He suspected she would say she had never been to school. His had been a half-fishing remark.

But all she replied was, 'Yes':

Stephen looked around him for a moment. Already, he had gone considerably further along the track than ever before. 'It really is beautiful up here.' It seemed a complete wilderness. The track had wound among the wide folds of the hill, so that nothing but wilderness was visible in any direction.

'I should like to live here,' said Stephen. 'I should like it now.' He knew that he partly meant 'now that Elizabeth was dead'.

'There are empty houses everywhere,' said the girl. 'You can just move into one. It's what Father and I did, and now it's our home.'

Stephen supposed that that at least explained something. It possibly elucidated one of the earliest of her odd remarks.

'I'll help you to find one, if you like,' said the girl. 'Father says that none of them have been lived in for hundreds of years. I know where all the best ones are.'

'I'll have to think about that,' said Stephen. 'I have my job, you must remember.' He wanted her to be rude about his job.

But she only said, 'We'll look now, if you like.'

'Tomorrow, perhaps. We're looking for the spring now.'

'Are you tired?' asked the girl, with apparently genuine concern, and presumably forgetting altogether what he had told her about his longing to walk all day.

'Not at all tired,' said Stephen, smiling at her.

'Then why were you looking at your watch?'

'A bad habit picked up in the civil service. We all do it.'

He had observed long before that she had no watch on her lovely brown forearm, no bracelet; only the marks of thorn scratches and the incisions of sharp stones. The light golden bloom on her arms filled him with delight and with desire.

In fact, he had omitted to time their progression, though he timed most things, so that the habit had wrecked his natural faculty. Perhaps another twenty or thirty minutes passed, while they continued to walk side by side, the track having as yet shown no particular sign of narrowing, so that one might think it still led somewhere, and that people still went there. As they advanced, they said little more of consequence for the moment; or so it seemed to Stephen. He surmised that there was now what is termed an understanding between them, even though in a sense he himself understood very little. It was more a phase for pleasant nothings, he deemed, always

supposing that he could evolve a sufficient supply of them, than for meaningful questions and reasonable responses.

Suddenly, the track seemed not to narrow, but to stop, even to vanish. Hereunto it had been surprisingly well trodden. Now he could see nothing but knee-high heather.

'The spring's over there,' said the girl in a matter of fact way, and pointing. Such simple and natural gestures are often the most beautiful.

'How right I was in saying that I could never find it alone!' remarked Stephen.

He could not see why the main track should not lead to the spring - if there really was a spring. Why else should the track be beaten to this spot? The mystery was akin to the Burton's Clough mystery. The uplands had been settled under other conditions than ours. Stephen, on his perambulations, had always felt that, everywhere.

But the girl was standing among the heather a few yards away, and Stephen saw that there was a curious serpentine rabbit run that he had failed to notice - except that rabbits do not run like serpents. There were several fair-sized birds flying overhead in silence. Stephen fancied they were kites.

He wriggled his way down the rabbit path, with little dignity.

There was the most beautiful small pool imaginable: clear, deep, lustrous, gently heaving at its centre, or near its centre. It stood in a small clearing.

All the rivers in Britain might be taken as rising here, and thus flowing until the first moment of their pollution.

Stephen became aware that now the sun really was shining. He had not noticed before. The girl stood on the far side of the pool in her faded shirt and trousers, smiling seraphically. The pool pleased her, so that suddenly everything pleased her.

'Have you kept the note I gave you?' asked Stephen.

She put her hand lightly on her breast pocket, and therefore on her breast.

'I'm glad,' said Stephen.

If the pool had not been between them, he would have seized her, whatever the consequences.

'Just clear water,' said the girl.

The sun brought out new colours in her hair. The shape of her head was absolutely perfect.

'The track,' said Stephen, 'seems to be quite well used. Is this where the people come?'

'No,' said the girl. 'They come to and from the places where they live.'

'I thought you said all the houses were empty.'

'What I said was there are many empty houses.'

'That is what you said. I'm sorry. But the track seems to come to an end. What do the people do then?'

'They find their way,' said the girl. 'Stop worrying about them.'

The water was still between them. Stephen was no longer in doubt that there was indeed something else between them. Really there was. The pool was intermittently throwing up tiny golden waves in the pure breeze, then losing them again.

'We haven't seen anybody,' said Stephen. 'I never do see anyone.'

The girl looked puzzled.

Stephen realized that the way he had put it, the statement that he never saw anyone, might have been tactless. 'When I go for my long walks alone,' he added.

'Not only then,' said the girl.

Stephen's heart turned over slightly.

'Possibly,' he said. 'I daresay you are very right.'

The kites were still flapping like torn pieces of charred pasteboard in the high air, though in the lower part of it.

'You haven't even looked to the bottom of the pool yet,' said the girl.

'I suppose not.' Stephen fell on his knees, as the girl had done at the milestone or waymark, and gazed downwards through the pellucid near-nothingness beneath the shifting golden rods. There were a few polished stones round the sides, but little else that he could see, and nothing that seemed of significance. How should there be, of course? Unless the girl had put it there, as Stephen realized might have been possible.

Stephen looked up. 'It's a splendid pool,' he said.

But now his eye caught something else; something other than the girl and the pool. On the edge of the rising ground behind the girl stood a small stone house. It was something else that Stephen had not previously noticed. Indeed, he had been reasonably sure that there had been nothing and no one, not so much as a hint of mankind, not for a quite long way, a quite long time.

'Is that where one of the people lives?' he asked, and in his turn pointed. 'Or perhaps more than one? '

'It's empty,' said the girl.

'Should we go and look?'

'If you like,' said the girl. Stephen quite saw that his expressed response to the glorious little spring had been inadequate. He had lost the trick of feeling, years and years ago.

'It's a splendid pool,' he said again, a little self-consciously.

Despite what the girl had said, Stephen had thought that to reach the house above them, they would have to scramble through the high heather. But he realized at once that there was a path, which was one further thing he had not previously noticed.

The girl went before, weaving backwards and forwards up the hillside. Following her, with his thoughts more free to wander, as the exertion made talking difficult, Stephen suddenly apprehended that the need to return for Harriet's teatime had for a season passed completely from his mind.

Apprehending it now, he did not even look at his watch. Apart from anything else, the struggle upwards was too intense for even the smallest distraction or secondary effort. The best thing might be for his watch simply to stop.

They were at the summit, with a wider horizon, but still Stephen could see no other structure than the one before him, though this time he gazed around with a certain care. From here, the pool below them seemed to catch the full sun all over its surface. It gleamed among the heathered rocks like a vast luminous sea anemone among weeds.

Stephen could see at once that the house appeared basically habitable. He had expected jagged holes in the walls, broken panes in the windows, less than half a roof, ubiquitous litter.

The door simply stood open, but it was a door, not a mere gap; a door in faded green, like the girl's trousers. Inside, the floorboards were present and there was even a certain amount of simple furniture, though, as an estate agent would at once have pointed out with apologies, no curtains and no carpets.

'Nell. Somebody lives here already,' Stephen said sharply, before they had even gone upstairs.

'Already?' queried the girl.

Stephen made the necessary correction. 'Someone lives here.'

'No,' said the girl. 'No one. Not for centuries.'

Of course that was particularly absurd and childish. Much of this furniture, Stephen thought, was of the kind offered by the furnishing department of a good Co-op. Stephen had sometimes come upon such articles on visits paid in the course of his work. He had to admit, however, that he had little idea when such houses as this actually were built at these odd spots on the moors. Possibly as long ago as in the seventeenth century? Possibly only sixty or eighty years ago?

Possibly—?

They went upstairs. There were two very low rooms, hardly as much as half lighted from one small and dirty window in each. One room was totally unfurnished. The sole content of the other was a double bed which absorbed much of the cubic capacity available. It was a quite handsome country object, with a carved head and foot. It even offered a seemingly intact mattress, badly in need of a wash.

'Someone *must* be living here,' said Stephen. 'At least sometimes. Perhaps the owners come here for the weekend. Or perhaps they're just moving in.'

As soon as he spoke, it occurred to him that the evidence was equally consistent with their moving out, but he did not continue.

'Lots of the houses are like this,' said the girl. 'No one lives in them.'

Stephen wondered vaguely whether the clear air or some factor of that kind might preserve things as if they were still in use. It was a familiar enough notion, though, in his case, somewhat unspecific. It would be simpler to disbelieve the girl, who was young and without experience, though perfectly eager, at least when others were eager. They returned downstairs.

'Shall we see some more houses?' asked the girl.

'I don't think I have the time.'

'You said you had a fortnight. I know what a fortnight is.'

'Yes.' He simply could not tell her that he had to report for Harriet's astringent teatime; nor, even now, was that in the forefront of his mind. The truth was that whereas hitherto he had been trying to paddle in deep waters, he was now floundering in them.

The girl had a suggestion. 'Why not live here for a fortnight?'

'I am committed to staying with my brother. He's not very fit. I should worry about him if I broke my word.' He realized that he was speaking to her in a more adult way than before. It had really begun with her speaking similarly to him.

'Does your worrying about him do him any good? '

'Not much, I'm afraid.'

'Does your worrying about everything do you any good? ' 'None whatever, Nell. None at all.'

He turned aside and looked out of the window; the parlour window might not be too grand a term, for all its need of cleaning.

He addressed her firmly. 'Would you give me a hand with all the things that need to be done? Even for a tenancy of a fortnight?'

'If you like.'

'We should have to do a lot of shopping.'

The girl, standing behind him, remained silent. It was an unusual non-response.

'I should have to cook on a primus stove,' said Stephen. 'I wonder if we can buy one? I used to be quite good with them.' Rapture was beginning.

The girl said nothing.

'We might need new locks on the doors.'

The girl spoke. 'There is only one door.'

'So there is,' said Stephen. 'In towns, houses have two, a front door and a back door. When trouble comes in at one, you can do a bolt through the other.'

'People don't need a lock,' said the girl. 'Why should they?' He turned away from the filthy window and gazed straight at her. 'Suppose I was to fall in love with you? ' he said.

'Then you would not have to go back after a fortnight.'

It could hardly have been a straighter reply.

He put one arm round her shoulders, one hand on her breast, so that the note he had written her lay between them. He remembered that the first letter written to a woman is always a love letter. 'Would you promise to visit me every day?'

'I might be unable to do that.'

'I don't want to seem unkind, but you did say that your father could manage.'

'If he discovers, he will keep me at home and send my sister out instead. He has powers. He's very frightening.'

Stephen relaxed his hold a little. He had been all along well aware how sadly impracticable was the entire idea.

For example: he could hardly even drive up to this place with supplies; even had his car not been in the course of an opportune overhaul in London, a very complete overhaul after all this anxious time. And that was only one thing; one among very many.

'Well, what's the answer?' Stephen said, smiling at her in the wrong way, longing for her in a very different way.

'I can't come and go the whole time,' said the girl.

'I see,' said Stephen.

He who had missed so many opportunities, always for excellent reasons, and for one excellent reason in particular, clearly saw that this might be his last opportunity, and almost certainly was.

'How should we live?' he asked. 'I mean how should we eat and manage? '

'As the birds do,' said the girl.

Stephen did not inquire of her how she came to know Shakespeare, as people put it. He might ask her that later. In the meantime, he could see that the flat, floating birds he had taken to be kites, were indeed drifting past the dirty window, and round and round the house, as it seemed. Of course his questions had been mere routine in any case. He could well have killed himself if she had made a merely routine response.

'Let's see,' he said. He gently took her hand. He kissed her softly on the lips. He returned with her upstairs.

It would perhaps have been more suitable if he had been leading the party, but that might be a trifle. Even the damp discolouration of the mattress might be a trifle. Harriet's teatime could not, in truth, be forced from the mind, but it was provisionally overruled. One learned the trick in the course of one's work, or one would break altogether.

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There were of course only the bed and the mattress; no sheets or blankets; no Spanish or Kashmiri rugs; no entangling silkiness, no singing save that of the moor. Elizabeth had never wished to make love like that. She had liked to turn on the record player, almost always Brahms or Schumann (the Rhenish Symphony was her particular favourite), and to ascend slowly into a deep fully made bed. But the matter had not seriously arisen for years. Stephen had often wondered why not.

Nell was lying on her front. Seemingly expectant and resistant at the same time, she clung like a clam. Her body was as brown as a pale chestnut, but it

was a strong and well-made body. Her short hair was wavy rather than curly. Stephen was ravished by the line of it on her strong neck. He was ravished by her relaxed shoulder blade. He was ravished by her perfect waist and thighs. He was ravished by her youth and youthful smell.

'Please turn over,' he said, after tugging at her intermittently, and not very effectively.

Fortunately, he was not too displeased by his own appearance. The hair on his body was bleaching and fading, but otherwise he could, quite sincerely, see little difference from when he had been twenty-four, and had married Elizabeth. He knew, however, that at these times sincerity is not enough; nor objectivity either. When are they?

'Please,' he said softly in Nell's ear. Her ears were a slightly unusual shape, and the most beautiful he had ever beheld, or beheld so intently.

He put his hand lightly on her neck. 'Please,' he said.

She wriggled over in a single swift movement, like a light stab from an invisible knife. He saw that her eyes were neither closed nor open, neither looking at him, nor looking at anything but him.

On the skin between her right shoulder and her right breast was a curious, brownish, greyish, bluish, irregular mark or patch, which had been hidden by her shirt, though Stephen could not quite see how. It was more demanding of attention than it might have been, partly because of its position, and partly, where Stephen was concerned, because of something vaguely else. In any case, it would mean that the poor girl could not reposefully wear a low-cut dress, should the need arise. Though it was by no means a birthmark in the usual sense, Nell had probably been lying on her front through chagrin about it. Upon Stephen, however, the effect was to make him love her more deeply; perhaps love her for the first time. He did not want her or her body to be quite perfect. In a real person, it would be almost vulgar. At this point, Harriet and Harriet's teatime came more prominently into view for a few seconds.

Nell might say something about the mark sooner or later. He would never take an initiative.

At the moment, she said nothing at all. He simply could not make out whether she was watching him or not. Her mouth was long and generous; but had not her whole proceeding been generous in a marvellous degree? He could not even make out whether she was taut or relaxed. No small mystery was Nell after years and years of a perfect, but always slow-moving, relationship with Elizabeth!

He kissed her intimately. When she made no particular response, not even a grunt, he began to caress her, more or less as he had caressed his wife. He took care not to touch the peculiar blemish, or even to enter its area. There was no need to do so. It occurred to Stephen that the mark might be the consequence of an injury; and so might in due course disappear, or largely so. In the end that happened even to many of the strangest human markings. One day, as the nannies used to say.

Suddenly she made a wild plunge at him that took away his breath. The surprise was directly physical, but moral also. He had found it a little difficult to assess Nell's likely age, and inquiry was out of the question; but he had supposed it probable that she was a virgin, and had quite deliberately resolved to accept the implication. Or so he had believed of himself.

Now she was behaving as a maenad.

As an oread, rather; Stephen thought at a later hour. For surely these moors were mountains, often above the thousand-foot contour; boundless uplands peopled solely by unwedded nymphs and their monstrous progenitors? Stephen had received a proper education at a proper place: in Stephen's first days, one had not made the grade, Stephen's grade, otherwise. Stephen's parents had undertaken sacrifices so immense that no one had fully recovered from them.

The last vestige of initiative had passed from Stephen like a limb. And yet, he fancied, it was not because Nell was what Elizabeth would have called unfeminine, but merely because she was young, and perhaps because she

lived without contamination, merging into the aspect and mutability of remote places. So, at least, he could only suppose.

Soon he ceased to suppose anything. He knew bliss unequalled, unprecedented, assuredly unimagined. Moreover, the wonder lasted for longer than he would have conceived of as possible. That particularly struck him.

Nell's flawed body was celestial. Nell herself was more wonderful than the dream of death. Nell could not possibly exist.

He was fondling her and feeling a trifle cold; much as Elizabeth would have felt. Not that it mattered in the very least. Nell was no maenad or oread. She was a half-frightened child, sweetly soft, responsive to his every thought, sometimes before he had fully given birth to it. She was a waif, a foundling. And it was he who had found her. And only yesterday.

'Tell me about your sister,' said Stephen. He realized that it was growing dark as well as chilly.

'She's not like me. You wouldn't like her.'

Stephen knew that ordinary, normal girls always responded much like that.

He smiled at Nell. 'But what is she like?'

'She's made quite differently. You wouldn't care for her.'

'Has she a name?'

'Of a sort.'

'What do you and your father call her?'

'We call her different things at different times. You're cold.' So she was human, after all, Stephen thought.

She herself had very little to put on. Two fairly light garments, a pair of stout socks, her solid shoes.

They went downstairs.

'Would you care to borrow my sweater?' asked Stephen. 'Until tomorrow?'

She made no reply, but simply stared at him through the dusk in the downstairs room, the living place, the parlour, the salon.

'Take it,' said Stephen. It was a heavy garment. Elizabeth had spent nearly four months knitting it continuously, while slowly recovering from her very first disintegration. It was in thick complex stitches and meant to last for ever. When staying with Harewood, Stephen wore it constantly.

Nell took the sweater but did not put it on. She was still staring at him. At such a moment her grey-green eyes were almost luminous.

'We'll meet again tomorrow,' said Stephen firmly. 'We'll settle down here tomorrow. I must say something to my brother and sister-in-law, and I don't care what happens after that. Not now. At least I do care. I care very much. As you well know.'

'It's risky,' she said.

'Yes,' he replied, because it was necessary to evade all discussion. 'Yes, but it can't be helped. You come as early as you can, and I'll arrive with some provisions for us. We really need some blankets too, and some candles. I'll see if I can borrow a Land-Rover from one of the farms.' He trusted that his confidence and his firm, practical actions would override all doubts.

'I may be stopped,' she said. 'My father can't read books but he can read minds. He does it all the time.'

'You must run away from him,' said Stephen firmly. 'We'll stay here for a little, and then you can come back to London with me.'

She made no comment on that, but simply repeated, 'My father can read my mind. I only have to be in the same room with him. He's frightening.'

Her attitude to her father seemed to have changed considerably. It was the experience of love, Stephen supposed; first love.

'Obviously, you must try to be in a different room as much as possible. It's only for one more night. We've known each other now for two days.'

'There's only one room.'

Stephen had known that such would be her rejoinder.

He well knew also that his behaviour might seem unromantic and even cold-hearted. But the compulsion upon him could not be plainer: if he did not return to the rectory tonight, Harriet, weakly aided by Harewood, would have the police after him; dogs would be scurrying across the moors, as if after Hercules, and perhaps searchlights sweeping also. Nothing could more fatally upset any hope of a quiet and enduring compact with such a one as Nell. He was bound for a rough scene with Harriet and Harewood as it was. It being now long past teatime, he would be lucky if Harriet had not taken action before he could reappear. Speed was vital and, furthermore, little of the situation could be explained with any candour to Nell. First, she would simply not understand what he said (even though within her range she was shrewd enough, often shrewder than he). Second, in so far as she did understand, she would panic and vanish. And he had no means of tracking her down at all. She was as shy about her abode as about the mark on her body; though doubtless with as little reason, or so Stephen hoped. He recognized that parting from her at all might be as unwise as it would be painful, but it was the lesser peril. He could not take her to London tonight, or to anywhere, because there was no accessible transport. Not nowadays. He could not take her to the rectory, where Harriet might make Harewood lay an anathema upon her. They could not stay in the moorland house without food or warmth.

Til walk with you to the top of the clough,' he said.

She shook her head. 'It's not there I live.'

'Where then? ' he asked at once.

'Not that way at all.'

'Will you get there?'

She nodded: in exactly what spirit it was hard to say.

He refrained from inquiring how she would explain the absence of specimens for her father. Two or three stones dragged from the walls of the house they were in, might serve the purpose in any case, he thought: outside and inside were almost equally mossed, lichened, adorned, encumbered.

'Goodnight, Nell. We'll meet tomorrow morning. Here.' He really had to go. Harriet was made anxious by the slightest irregularity, and when she became anxious, she became frenzied. His present irregularity was by no means slight already; assuredly not slight by Harriet's standards.

To his great relief, Nell nodded again. She had still not put on his sweater.

'In a few days' time, we'll go to London. We'll be together always.' He could hardly believe his own ears listening to his own voice saying such things. After all this time! After Elizabeth! After so much inner peace and convinced adoration and asking for nothing more! After the fearful illness!

They parted with kisses but with little drama. Nell sped off into what the map depicted as virtual void.

'All the same,' Stephen reflected, 'I must look at the map again. I'll try to borrow Harewood's dividers.'

He pushed back through the heather, rejoicing in his sense of direction, among so many other things to rejoice about, and began lumbering down the track homewards. The light was now so poor that he walked faster and faster; faster even than he had ascended. In the end, he was running uncontrollably.

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Therefore, his heart was already pounding when he discovered that the rectory was in confusion; though, at the rectory, even confusion had a slightly wan quality.

During the afternoon, Harriet had had a seizure of some kind, and during the evening had been taken off in a public ambulance.

'What time did it happen? ' asked Stephen. He knew from all too much experience that it was the kind of thing that people did ask.

'I don't really know, Stephen,' replied Harewood. 'I was in my specimens room reading the *Journal*, and I fear that a considerable time may have passed before I came upon her. I was too distressed to look at my watch even then. Besides, between ourselves, my watch loses rather badly.'

Though Stephen tried to help in some way, the improvised evening meal was upsetting. Harriet had planned rissoles sauted in ghee, but neither of the men really knew how to cook with ghee. The home-made Congress Pudding was nothing less than nauseous. Very probably, some decisive final touches had been omitted.

'You see how it is, young Stephen,' said Harewood, after they had munched miserably but briefly. 'The prognosis cannot be described as hopeful. I may have to give up the living.'

'You can't possibly do that, Harewood, whatever happens. There is Father's memory to think about. I'm sure I should think about him more often myself.' Stephen's thoughts were, in fact, upon quite specially different topics.

'I don't wish to go, I assure you, Stephen. I've been very happy here.'

The statement surprised Stephen, but was of course thoroughly welcome and appropriate.

'There is always prayer, Harewood.'

'Yes, Stephen, indeed. I may well have been remiss. That might explain much.'

They had been unable to discover where Harriet hid the coffee, so sat for moments in reverent and reflective silence, one on either side of the bleak

table: a gift from the nearest branch of the Free India League.

Stephen embarked upon a tentative demarche. 'I need hardly say that I don't want to leave you in the lurch.'

'It speaks for itself that there can be no question of that.'

Stephen drew in a quantity of air. 'To put it absolutely plainly. I feel that for a spell you would be better off at this time without me around to clutter up the place and make endless demands.'

For a second time within hours, Stephen recognized quite clearly that his line of procedure could well be seen as coldblooded; but, for a second time, he was acting under extreme compulsion - compulsion more extreme than he had expected ever again to encounter, at least on the hither side of the Styx.

'I should never deem you to be doing that, young Stephen. Blood is at all times, even the most embarrassing times, thicker than water. It was Cardinal Newman, by the way, who first said that; a prelate of a different soteriology.'

Stephen simply did not believe it, but he said nothing. Harewood often came forward with such assertions, but they were almost invariably erroneous. Stephen sometimes doubted whether Harewood could be completely relied upon even in the context of his private speciality, the lichens.

'I think I had better leave tomorrow morning and so reduce the load for a span. I am sure Doreen will appreciate it.'Doreen was the intermittent help; a little brash, where in former days no doubt she would have been a little simple. Stephen had always supposed that brashness might make it more possible to serve Harriet. Doreen had been deserted, childless, by her young husband; but there had been a proper divorce. Harewood was supposed to be taking a keen interest in Doreen, who was no longer in her absolutely first youth.

'You will be rather more dependent upon Doreen for a time,' added Stephen.

'I suppose that may well be,' said Harewood. Stephen fancied that his brother almost smiled. He quite saw that he might have thought so because of the ideas in his own mind, at which he himself was smiling continuously.

'You must do whatever you think best for all concerned, Stephen,' said Harewood. 'Including, of course, your sister-in- law, dear Harriet.'

'I think I should go now and perhaps come back a little later.'

'As you will, Stephen. I have always recognized that you have a mind trained both academically and by your work. I am a much less coordinated spirit. Oh yes, I know it well. I should rely very much upon your judgement in almost any serious matter.'

Circumstanced as at the moment he was, Stephen almost blushed.

But Harewood made things all right by adding, 'Except perhaps in certain matters of the spirit which, in the nature of things, lie quite particularly between my Maker and myself alone.'

'Oh, naturally,' said Stephen.

'Otherwise,' continued Harewood, 'and now that Harriet is unavailable - for a very short time only, we must hope - it is upon you, Stephen, that I propose to rely foremost, in many pressing concerns of this world.'

Beyond doubt, Harewood now was not all but smiling. He was smiling nearly at full strength. He explained this immediately.

'My catarrh seems very much better,' he said. 'I might consider setting forth in splendour one of these days. Seeking specimens, I mean.'

Stephen plunged upon impulse.

'It may seem a bit odd in the circumstances, but I should be glad to have the use of a Land-Rover. There's a building up on the moors I should like to look at again before I go, and it's too far to walk in the time. There's a perfectly good track to quite near it. Is there anyone you know of in the parish who would lend me such a thing? Just for an hour or two, of course.'

Harewood responded at once. 'You might try Tom Jarrold. I regret to say that he's usually too drunk to drive. Indeed, one could never guarantee that his vehicle will even leave the ground.'

Possibly it was not exactly the right reference, but what an excellent and informed parish priest Harewood was suddenly proving to be!

Harewood had reopened the latest number of the Journal, which he had been sitting on in the chair all the time. His perusal had of course been interrupted by the afternoon's events.

'Don't feel called upon to stop talking,' said Harewood. 'I can read and listen at the same time perfectly well.'

Stephen reflected that the attempt had not often been made when Harriet had been in the room.

'I don't think there's anything more to say at the moment. We seem to have settled everything that can be settled.'

'I shall be depending upon you in many different matters, remember,' said Harewood, but without looking up from the speckled diagrams.

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As soon as Stephen turned on the hanging light in his bedroom, he noticed the new patch on the wallpaper; if only because it was immediately above his bed. The wallpaper had always been lowering anyway. He was the more certain that the particular patch was new because, naturally, he made his own bed each morning, which involved daily confrontation with that particular surface. Of course there had always been the other such patches among the marks on the walls.

Still, the new arrival was undoubtedly among the reasons why Stephen slept very little that night, even though, in his own estimation, he needed sleep so badly. There again, however, few do sleep in the first phase of what is felt to be a reciprocated relationship: equally fulfilling and perilous, always deceptive, and always somewhere known to be. The mixed ingredients of

the last two days churned within Stephen, as in Harriet's battered cook-pot; one rising as another fell. He was treating Harewood as he himself would not wish to be treated; and who could tell what had really led to Harriet's collapse?

In the end, bliss drove out bewilderment, and seemed the one thing sure, as perhaps it was.

Later still, when daylight was all too visible through the frail curtains, Stephen half dreamed that he was lying inert on some surface he could not define and that Nell was administering water to him from a chalice. But the chalice, doubtless a consecrated object to begin with, and certainly of fairest silver from the Spanish mines, was blotched and blemished. Stephen wanted to turn away, to close his eyes properly, to expostulate, but could do none of these things. As Nell gently kissed his brow, he awoke fully with a compelling thirst. He had heard of people waking thirsty in the night, but to himself he could not remember it ever before happening. He had never lived like that.

There was no water in the room, because the house was just sufficiently advanced to make visitors go to the bathroom. Stephen walked quietly down the passage, then hesitated. He recollected that nowadays the bathroom door opened with an appalling wrench and scream.

It would be very wrong indeed to take the risk of waking poor Harewood, in his new isolation. Stephen crept on down the stairs towards the scullery, and there was Harewood, sleeping like the dead, not in the least sprawling, but, on the contrary, touchingly compressed and compact in the worn chair. For a moment, he looked like a schoolboy, though of course in that curtained light.

Harewood was murmuring contentedly. 'Turn over. No, right over. You can trust me'; then, almost ecstatically, almost like a juvenile, 'It's beautiful. Oh, it's beautiful.'

Stephen stole away to the back quarters, where both the luncheon and the supper washing-up, even the washing-up after tea, all awaited the touch of a vanished hand.

The cold tap jerked and jarred as it always did, but when Stephen went back, Harewood was slumbering still. His self-converse was now so ideal that it had fallen into incoherence. The cheap figure on the mantel of Shiva or somebody, which Stephen had always detested, sneered animatedly.

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But there Nell really was; really, really was.

In his soul, Stephen was astonished. Things do not go like that in real life, least of all in the dreaded demesne of the heart.

However, they unloaded the Land-Rover together, as if everything were perfectly real; toiling up the heather paths with heavy loads, Nell always ahead, always as strong as he: which was really rather necessary.

'I must take the Rover back. Come with me.'

He had not for a moment supposed that she would, but she did, and with no demur.

'It's rough going,' he said. But she merely put her brown hand on his thigh, as she sat and bumped beside him.

They were a pair now.

'It won't take a moment while I settle with the man.'

He was determined that it should not. It must be undesirable that the two of them be seen together in the village. Probably it was undesirable that he himself, even alone, be seen there before a long time had passed. He might perhaps steal back one distant day like Enoch Arden, and take Harewood completely by surprise, both of them now bearded, shaggily or skimpily. What by then would have become of Nell?

They walked upwards hand in hand. Every now and then he said something amorous or amusing to her, but not very often because, as he had foreseen, the words did not come to him readily. He was bound to become more

fluent as his heart reopened. She was now speaking more often than he was: not merely more shrewd, but more explicit.

'I'm as close to you as that,' she said, pointing with her free hand to a patch of rocky ground with something growing on it - growing quite profusely, almost exuberantly. She had spoken in reply to one of his questions.

He returned the squeeze of the hand he was holding.

'We'll be like the holly and the ivy,' she volunteered later, 'and then we'll be like the pebble and the shard.'

He thought that both comparisons were, like Harewood's comparisons, somewhat inexact, but, in her case, all the more adorable by reason of it. He kissed her.

At first he could not see their house, though, as they neared it, his eyes seemed to wander round the entire horizon: limited in range, however, by the fact that they were mounting quite steeply. But Nell led the way through the rabbit and snake paths, first to the spring, then upwards once more; and there, needless to say, the house was. Earlier that afternoon, they had already toiled up and down several times with the baggage. The earlier occupants had been sturdy folk; men and women alike; aboriginals.

It was somewhere near the spring that Nell, this time, made her possibly crucial declaration.

'I've run away,' she said, as if previously she had been afraid to speak the words. 'Take care of me.'

They entered.

When they had been lugging in the food and the blankets and the cressets and the pans, he had of policy refrained from even glancing at the walls of the house; but what could it matter now? For the glorious and overwhelming moment at least? And, judging by recent experience, the moment might even prove a noticeably long moment. Time might again stand still. Time sometimes did if one had not expected it.

Therefore, from as soon as they entered, he stared round at intervals quite brazenly, though not when Nell was looking at him, as for so much of the time she was now doing.

The upshot was anti-climax: here was not the stark, familiar bedroom in the rectory, and Stephen realized that he had not yet acquired points, or areas, of reference and comparison. He was at liberty to deem that they might never be needed.

Nell was ordering things, arranging things, even beginning to prepare things: all as if she had been a diplomee of a domestic college; as if she had been blessed with a dedicated mamma or aunt. After all, thought Stephen, as he watched her and intercepted her, her appearance is largely that of an ordinary modern girl.

He loved her.

He turned his back upon her earlier curious intimations. She had run away from it all; and had even stated as much, unasked and unprompted. Henceforth, an ordinary modern girl was what for him she should firmly be; though loyaller, tenderer, stronger than any other.

When, in the end, languishingly they went upstairs, this time they wrapt themselves in lovely new blankets, but Stephen was in no doubt at all that still there was only the one mark on her.

Conceivably, even, it was a slightly smaller mark.

He would no longer detect, no longer speculate, no longer be anxious, no longer imagine. No more mortal marks and corruptions. For example, he would quite possibly never sleep in that room at the rectory again.

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Thus, for a week, he counted the good things only, as does a sundial. They were many and the silken sequence of them seemed to extend over a lifetime. He recollected the Christian Science teaching that evil is a mere illusion. He clung to the thesis that time is no absolute.

Nell had the knack of supplementing the food he had purchased with fauna and flora that she brought back from the moor. While, at a vague hour of the morning, he lay long among the blankets, simultaneously awake and asleep, she went forth, and never did she return empty-handed, seldom, indeed, other than laden. He was at last learning not from talk but from experience, even though from someone else's experience, how long it really was possible to live without shops, without bureaucratically and commercially modified products, without even watered cash. All that was needed was to be alone in the right place with the right person.

He even saw it as possible that the two of them might remain in the house indefinitely: were it not that his 'disappearance' would inevitably be 'reported' by someone, doubtless first by Arthur Thread in the office, so that his early exposure was inevitable. That, after all, was a main purpose of science: to make things of all kinds happen sooner than they otherwise would.

Each morning, after Nell had returned from her sorties and had set things in the house to rights, she descended naked to the spring and sank beneath its waters. She liked Stephen to linger at the rim watching her, and to him it seemed that she disappeared in the pool altogether, vanished from sight, and clear though the water was, the clearest, Stephen surmised, that he had ever lighted upon. Beyond doubt, therefore, the little pool really was peculiarly deep, as Nell had always said: it would be difficult to distinguish between the natural movements of its ever-gleaming surface, and movements that might emanate from a submerged naiad. It gave Stephen special pleasure that they drank exclusively from the pool in which Nell splashed about, but, partly for that reason, he confined his own lustrations to dabblings from the edge, like a tripper.

Stephen learned by experience, a new experience, the difference between drinking natural water and drinking safeguarded water, as from a sanitized public convenience. When she emerged from the pool, Nell each day shook her short hair like one glad to be alive, and each day her hair seemed to be dry in no time.

One morning, she washed her shirt and trousers in the pool, having no replacements as far as Stephen could see. The garments took longer to dry

than she did, and Nell remained unclothed for most of the day, even though there were clouds in the sky. Clouds made little difference anyway, nor quite steady rain, nor drifting mountain mist. The last named merely fortified the peace and happiness.

'Where did you get those clothes?' asked Stephen, even though as a rule he no longer asked anything.

'I found them. They're nice.'

He said nothing for a moment.

'*Aren't* they nice?' she inquired anxiously.

'Everything to do with you and in and about and around you is nice in every possible way. You are perfect. Everything concerned with you is perfect.'

She smiled gratefully and went back, still unclothed, to the house, where she was stewing up everything together in one of the new pots. The pot had already leaked, and it had been she who had mended the leak, with a preparation she had hammered and kneaded while Stephen had merely looked on in delighted receptivity, wanting her as she worked.

He had a number of books in his bag, reasonably well chosen, because he had supposed that on most evenings at the rectory he would be retiring early; but now he had no wish to read anything. He conjectured that he would care little if the capacity to read somehow faded from him. He even went so far as to think that, given only a quite short time, it might possibly do so.

At moments, they wandered together about the moor; he, as like as not, with his hand on her breast, on that breast pocket of hers which contained his original and only letter to her, and which she had carefully taken out and given to him when washing the garment, and later carefully replaced. Than these perambulations few excursions could be more uplifting, but Stephen was wary all the same, knowing that if they were to meet anyone, however blameless, the spell might break, and paradise end.

Deep happiness can but be slighted by third parties, whosoever, without exception, they be. No one is so pure as to constitute an exception.

And every night the moon shone through the small windows and fell across their bed and their bodies in wide streaks, oddly angled.

'You are like a long, sweet parsnip,' Stephen said. 'Succulent but really rather tough.'

'I know nothing at all,' she replied. 'I only know you.'

The mark below her shoulder stood out darkly, but, God be praised, in isolation. What did the rapidly deteriorating state of the walls and appurtenances matter by comparison with that?

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But in due course, the moon, upon which the seeding and growth of plants and of the affections largely depend, had entered its dangerous third quarter.

Stephen had decided that the thing he had to do was take Nell back quickly and quietly to London, and return as soon as possible with his reinvigorated car, approaching as near as he could, in order to collect their possessions in the house. The machine would go there, after all, if he drove it with proper vigour; though it might be as well to do it at a carefully chosen hour, in order to evade Harewood, Doreen, and the general life of the village.

He saw no reason simply to abandon all his purchases and, besides, he felt obscurely certain that it was unlucky to do so, though he had been unable to recall the precise belief. Finally, it would seem likely that some of the varied accessories in the house might be useful in Stephen's new life with Nell. One still had to be practical at times, just as one had to be firm at times.

Nell listened to what he had to say, and then said she would do whatever he wanted. The weather was entirely fair for the moment.

When the purchased food had finally run out, and they were supposedly dependent altogether upon what Nell could bring in off the moor, they departed from the house, though not, truthfully, for that reason. They left everything behind them and walked down at dusk past Burton's Clough to the village. Stephen knew the time of the last bus which connected with a train to London. It was something he knew wherever he was. In a general way, he had of course always liked the train journey and disliked the bus journey.

It was hard to imagine what Nell would make of such experiences, and of those inevitably to come. Though she always said she knew nothing, she seemed surprised by nothing either. Always she brought back to Stephen the theories that there were two kinds of knowledge; sometimes of the same things.

All the others in the bus were old age pensioners. They had been visiting younger people and were now returning. They sat alone, each as far from each as space allowed. In the end, Stephen counted them. There seemed to be eight, though it was hard to be sure in the bad light, and with several pensioners already slumped forward.

There were at least two kinds of bad light also; the beautiful dim light of the house on the moor, and the depressing light in a nationalized bus. Stephen recalled Ellen Terry's detestation of all electric light. And of course there were ominous marks on the dirty ceiling of the bus and on such of the side panels as Stephen could see, including that on the far side of Nell, who sat beside him, with her head on his shoulder, more like an ordinary modern girl than ever. Where could she have learned that when one was travelling on a slow, ill-lighted bus with the man one loved, one put one's head on his shoulder?

But it was far more that she had somewhere, somehow learned. The slightest physical contact with her induced in Stephen a third dichotomy: the reasonable, rather cautious person his whole life and career surely proved him to be, was displaced by an all but criminal visionary. Everything turned upon such capacity as he might have left to change the nature of time.

The conductor crept down the dingy passage and sibilated in Stephen's ear. 'We've got to stop here. Driver must go home. Got a sick kid. There'll be a reserve bus in twenty minutes. All right?'

The conductor didn't bother to explain to the pensioners. They would hardly have understood. For them, the experience itself would be ample. A few minutes later, everyone was outside in the dark, though no one risked a roll call. The lights in the bus had been finally snuffed out, and the crew were making off, aclank with the accoutrements of their tenure, spanners, and irregular metal boxes, and enamelled mugs.

Even now, Nell seemed unsurprised and unindignant. She, at least, appeared to acknowledge that all things have an end, and to be acting on that intimation. As usual, Stephen persuaded her to don his heavy sweater.

It was very late indeed, before they were home; though Stephen could hardly use the word now that not only was Elizabeth gone, but also there was somewhere else, luminously better - or, at least, so decisively different - and, of course, a new person too.

Fortunately, the train had been very late, owing to signal trouble, so that they had caught it and been spared a whole dark night of it at the station, as in a story. Stephen and Nell had sat together in the bulfet, until they had been ejected, and the striplighting quelled. Nell had never faltered. She had not commented even when the train, deprived of what railwaymen call its 'path', had fumbled its way to London, shunting backwards nearly as often as running forwards. In the long, almost empty, excursion-type coach had been what Stephen could by now almost complacently regard as the usual smears and blotches.

'Darling, aren't you cold?' He had other, earlier sweaters to lend.

She shook her head quite vigorously.

After that, it had been easy for Stephen to close his eyes almost all the way. The other passenger had appeared to be a fireman in uniform, though of course without helmet. It was hard to believe that he would suddenly rise

and rob them, especially as he was so silently slumbering. Perhaps he was all the time a hospital porter or a special messenger or an archangel.

On the Benares table which filled the hall of the flat (a wedding present from Harewood and poor Harriet, who, having been engaged in their teens, had married long ahead of Stephen and Elizabeth), was a parcel, weighty but neat.

'Forgive me,' said Stephen. 'I never can live with unopened parcels or letters.'

He snapped the plastic string in a second and tore through the glyptal wrapping. It was a burly tome entitled *Lichen, Moss, and Wrack. Usage and Abusage in Peace and War. A Military and Medical Abstract*. Scientific works so often have more title than imaginative works.

Stephen flung the book back on the table. It fell with a heavy clang.

'Meant for my brother. It's always happening. People don't seem to know there's a difference between us.'

He gazed at her. He wanted to see nothing else.

She looked unbelievably strange in her faded trousers and

the sweater Elizabeth had made. Elizabeth would have seen a ghost and fainted. Elizabeth really did tend to faint in the sudden presence of the occult.

'We are not going to take it to him. It'll have to be posted. I'll get the Department to do it tomorrow.'

He paused. She smiled at him, late though it was.

Late or early? What difference did it make? It was not what mattered.

'I told you that I should have to go to the Department tomorrow. There's a lot to explain.'

She nodded. 'And then we'll go back? ' She had been anxious about that ever since they had started. He had not known what to expect.

'Yes. After a few days.'

Whatever he intended in the first place, he had never made it clear to her where they would be living in the longer run. This was partly because he did not know himself. The flat, without Elizabeth, really was rather horrible. Stephen had not forgotten Elizabeth for a moment. How could he have done? Nor could Stephen wonder that Nell did not wish to live in the flat. The flat was disfigured and puny.

Nell still smiled with her usual seeming understanding. He had feared that by now she would demur at his reference to a few days, and had therefore proclaimed it purposefully.

He smiled back at her. 'I'll buy you a dress.'

She seemed a trifle alarmed.

'It's time you owned one.'

'I don't own anything.'

'Yes, you do. You own me. Let's go to bed, shall we?'

But she spoke. 'What's this?'

As so often happens, Nell had picked up and taken an interest in the thing he would least have wished.

It was a large, lumpy shopping bag from a craft room in Burnham-on-Sea, where Elizabeth and he had spent an unwise week in their early days. What the Orient was to Harriet, the seaside had been to Elizabeth. Sisters-in-law often show affinities. The shopping bag had continued in regular use ever since, and not only for shopping, until Elizabeth had been no longer mobile.

'It's a bag made of natural fibres,' said Stephen. 'It belonged to my late wife.'

'It smells. It reminds me.'

'Many things here remind *me*,' said Stephen. 'But a new page has been turned.' He kept forgetting that Nell was unaccustomed to book metaphors.

She appeared to be holding the bag out to him. Though not altogether knowing why, he took it from her. He then regretted doing so.

It was not so much the smell of the bag. He was entirely accustomed to that. It was that, in his absence, the bag had become sodden with dark growths, outside and inside. It had changed character completely.

Certainly the bag had been perfectly strong and serviceable when last he had been in contact with it; though for the moment he could not recollect when that had been. He had made little use of the bag when not under Elizabeth's direction.

He let the fetid mass fall on top of the book on the brass table.

'Let's forget everything,' he said. 'We still have a few hours.'

'Where do I go? ' she asked, smiling prettily.

'Not in there,' he cried, as she put her hand on one of the doors. He very well knew that he must seem far too excitable. He took a pull on himself. 'Try this room.'

When Elizabeth had become ill, the double bed had been moved into the spare room. It had been years since Stephen had slept in that bed, though, once again, he could not in the least recall how many years. The first step towards mastering time is always to make time meaningless.

It was naturally wonderful to be at long last in a fully equipped deep double bed with Nell. She had shown no expectation of being invited to borrow one of Elizabeth's expensive nightdresses. Nell was a primitive still, and it was life or death to keep her so. He had never cared much for flowing, gracious bedwear in any case; nor had the wonder that was Elizabeth seemed to him to need such embellishments.

But he could not pretend, as he lay in Nell's strong arms and she in his, that the condition of the spare room was in the least reassuring. Before he had quickly turned off the small bedside light, the new marks on the walls had seemed like huge inhuman faces; and the effect was all the more alarming in that these walls had been painted, inevitably long ago, by Elizabeth in person, and had even been her particular domestic display piece. The stained overall she had worn for the task, still hung in the cupboard next door, lest the need arise again.

It was always the trouble. So long as one was far from the place once called home, one could successfully cast secondary matters from the mind, or at least from the hurting part of it; but from the moment of return, in fact from some little while before that, one simply had to recognize that, for most of one's life, secondary matters were just about all there were. Stephen bad learned ages ago that secondary matters were always the menace.

Desperation, therefore, possibly made its contribution to the mutual passion that charged the few hours available to them.

Within a week, the walls might be darkened all over; and what could the development after *that* conceivably be?

Stephen strongly suspected that the mossiness, the malady, would become more conspicuously three-dimensional at any moment. Only as a first move, of course.

He managed to close his mind against all secondary considerations and to give love its fullest licence yet.

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Thread was in the office before Stephen, even though Stephen had risen most mortifyingly early, and almost sleepless. It was a commonplace that the higher one ascended in the service, the earlier one had to rise, in order to ascend higher still. The lamas never slept at all.

'Feeling better?' Thread could ask such questions with unique irony.

'Much better, thank you.'

'You still look a bit peaky.' Thread was keeping his finger at the place he had reached in the particular file.

'I had a tiresome journey back. I've slept very little.'

'It's always the trouble. Morag and I make sure of a few days to settle in before we return to full schedule.'

'Elizabeth and I used to do that also. It's a bit different now.' Thread looked Stephen straight in the eyes, or very nearly. 'Let me advise, for what my advice is worth. I recommend you to lose yourself in your work for the next two or three years at the least. Lose yourself completely. Forget everything else. In my opinion, it's always the best thing at these times. Probably the only thing.'

'Work doesn't mean to me what it did.'

'Take yourself in hand, and it soon will again. After all, very real responsibilities do rest in this room. We both understand that quite well. We've reached that sort of level, Stephen. What we do nowadays, *matters*. If you keep that in mind at all times, and I do mean at all times, the thought will see you through. I know what I'm talking about.'

Thread's eyes were now looking steadily at his finger, lest it had made some move on its own.

'Yes,' said Stephen, 'but you're talking about yourself, you know.'

Stephen was very well aware that the sudden death some years before of Arthur Thread's mother had not deflected Thread for a day from the tasks appointed. Even the funeral had taken place during the weekend; for which Thread had departed on the Friday evening with several major files in his briefcase, as usual. As for Thread's wife, Morag, she was a senior civil servant too, though of course in a very different department. The pair took very little leave in any case, and hardly any of it together. Their two girls

were at an expensive boarding school on the far side of France, almost in Switzerland.

'I speak from my own experience,' corrected Thread.

'It appears to me,' said Stephen, 'that I have reached the male climacteric. It must be what's happening to me.'

'I advise you to think again,' said Thread. 'There's no such thing. Anyway you're too young for when it's supposed to be. It's not till you're sixty-three; within two years of retirement.' Thread could keep his finger in position no longer, lest his arm fall off. 'If you'll forgive me, I'm rather in the middle of something. Put yourself absolutely at ease. I'll be very pleased to have another talk later.'

'What's that mark?' asked Stephen, pointing to the wall above Thread's rather narrow headpiece. So often the trouble seemed to begin above the head. 'Was it there before? '

'I'm sure I don't know. Never forget the whole place is going to be completely done over next year. Now do let me concentrate for a bit.'

***

As the time for luncheon drew near, another man, Mark Tremble, peeped in.

'Glad to see you back, Stephen. I really am.'

'Thank you, Mark. I wish I could more sincerely say I was glad to be back.'

'Who could be? Come and swim?'

Stephen had regularly done it with Mark Tremble and a shifting group of others; usually at lunchtime on several days a week. It had been one of twenty devices for lightening momentarily the weight of Elizabeth's desperation. The bath was in the basement of the building. Soon the bath was to be extended

and standardized, and made available at times to additional grades.

'Very well.'

Stephen had at one time proposed to tear back; to be with Nell for a few moments; perhaps to buy that dress: but during the long morning he had decided against all of it.

His real task was to put down his foot with the establishment; to secure such modified pension as he was entitled to; to concentrate, as Thread always concentrated; to depart.

He had not so far said a word about it to anyone in the place. The two seniors changed in the sketchy cubicles, and emerged almost at the same moment in swimming trunks. There seemed to be no one else in or around the pool that day, though the ebbing and flowing of table tennis were audible through the partition.

'I say, Stephen. What's that thing on your back?'

Stephen stopped dead on the wet tiled floor. 'What thing?' 'It's a bit peculiar. I'm sure it wasn't there before. Before you went away. I'm extremely sorry to mention it.'

'What's it look like?' asked Stephen. 'Can you describe it?' 'The best I can do is that it looks rather like the sort of thing you occasionally see on trees. I think it may simply be something stuck on to you. Would you like me to give it a tug?'

'I think not,' said Stephen. 'I am sorry it upsets you. I'll go back and dress. I think it would be better.'

'Yes,' said Mark Tremble. 'It does upset me. It's best to admit it. Either it's something that will just come off with a good rub, or you'd better see a doctor, Stephen.'

'I'll see what I can do,' said Stephen.

'I don't feel so much like a swim, after all,' said Mark Tremble. 'I'll dress too and then we'll both have a drink. I feel we could both do with one.'

'I'm very sorry about it,' said Stephen. 'I apologize.'

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'What have you been doing all day?' asked Stephen, as soon as he was back and had changed out of the garments currently normal in the civil service, casual and characterless. 'I hope you've been happy.'

'I found this on the roof.' Nell was holding it in both her hands; which were still very brown. It was a huge lump: mineral, vegetable, who could tell? Or conceivably a proportion of each.

'Your father would be interested.'

Nell recoiled. 'Don't talk like that. It's unlucky.' Indeed, she had nearly dropped the dense mass.

It had been an idiotic response on Stephen's part; mainly the consequence of his not knowing what else to say. He was aware that it was perfectly possible to attain the roof of the building by way of the iron fire ladder, to which, by law, access had to be open to tenants at all hours.

'I could do with a drink,' said Stephen, though he had been drinking virtually the whole afternoon, without Thread even noticing, or without sparing time to acknowledge that he had noticed. Moira, the coloured girl from the typing area, had simply winked her big left eye at Stephen. 'I've had a difficult day.'

'Oh!' Nell's cry was so sincere and eloquent that it was as if he had been mangled in a traffic accident.

'*How* difficult?' she asked.

'It's just that it's been difficult for me to make the arrangements to get away, to leave the place.'

'But we *are* going?' He knew it was what she was thinking about.

'Yes, we are going. I promised.'

He provided Nell with a token drink also. At first she had seemed to be completely new to liquor. Stephen had always found life black without it, but his need for it had become more habitual during Elizabeth's illness. He trusted that Nell and he would, with use, wont, and time, evolve a mutual equilibrium.

At the moment, he recognized that he was all but tight, though he fancied that at such times he made little external manifestation. Certainly Nell would detect nothing; if only because presumably she lacked data. Until now, he had never really been in the sitting room of the flat since his return. Here, the new tendrils on the walls and ceiling struck him as resembling a Portuguese man of war's equipment; the coloured, insensate creature that can sting a swimmer to death at thirty feet distance, and had done so more than once when Elizabeth and he, being extravagant, had stayed at Cannes for a couple of weeks. It had been there that Elizabeth had told him finally she could never have a child. Really that was what they were doing there, though he had not realized it. The man of war business, the two victims, had seemed to have an absurd part in their little drama. No one in the hotel had talked of anything else.

'Let's go to bed now,' said Stephen to Nell. 'We can get up again later to eat.'

She put her right hand in his left hand.

Her acquiescence, quiet and beautiful, made him feel compunctious.

'Or are you hungry?' he asked. 'Shall we have something to eat first? I wasn't thinking.'

She shook her head. 'I've been foraging.'

She seemed to know so many quite literary words. He gave no time to wondering where exactly the forage could have taken place. It would be unprofitable. Whatever Nell had brought in would be wholesomer, inestimably better in every way, than food from any shop.

As soon as she was naked, he tried, in the electric light, to scrutinize her. There still seemed to be only the one mark on her body, truly a quite small

mark by the standards of the moment, though he could not fully convince himself that it really was contracting.

However, the examination was difficult: he could not let Nell realize what exactly he was doing; the light was not very powerful, because latterly Elizabeth had disliked a strong light anywhere, and he had felt unable to argue; most of all, he had to prevent Nell seeing whatever Mark Tremble had seen on his own person, had himself all the time to lie facing Nell or flat on his back. In any case, he wondered always how much Nell saw that he saw; how much, whatever her utterances and evidences, she analysed of the things that he analysed.

The heavy curtains, chosen and hung by Elizabeth, had, it seemed, remained drawn all day; and by now the simplest thing was for Stephen to switch off what light there was.

Nell, he had thought during the last ten days or ten aeons, was at her very best when the darkness was total.

He knew that heavy drinking was said to increase desire and to diminish performance; and he also knew that it was high time in his life for him to begin worrying about such things. He had even so hinted to Arthur Thread; albeit mainly to startle Thread, and to foretoken his, Stephen's, new life course; even though any such intimation to Thread would be virtually useless. There can be very few to whom most of one's uttered remarks can count for very much.

None the less, Nell and Stephen omitted that evening to arise later; even though Stephen had fully and sincerely intended it.

The next morning, very early the next morning, Nell vouchsafed to Stephen an unusual but wonderful breakfast - if one could apply so blurred a noun to so far-fetched a repast.

Stephen piled into his civil service raiment, systematically non-committal. He was taking particular trouble not to see his own bare back in any looking glass. Fortunately, there was no such thing in the dim bathroom.

'Goodbye, my Nell. Before the weekend we shall be free.'

He supposed that she knew what a weekend was. By now, it could hardly be clearer that she knew almost everything that mattered in the least.

But, during that one night, the whole flat seemed to have become dark green, dark grey, plain black: patched everywhere, instead of only locally, as when they had arrived. Stephen felt that the walls, floors, and ceilings were beginning to advance towards one another. The knick-knacks were de-materializing most speedily. When life once begins to move, it can scarcely be prevented from setting its own pace. The very idea of intervention becomes ridiculous.

What was Nell making of these swift and strange occurrences? All Stephen was sure of was that it would be unwise to take too much for granted. He must hew his way out; if necessary, with a bloody axe, as the man in the play put it.

Stephen kissed Nell ecstatically. She was smiling as he shut the door. She might smile, off and on, all day, he thought; smile as she foraged.

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By that evening, he had drawn a curtain, thick enough even for Elizabeth to have selected, between his homebound self and the events of the daylight.

There was no technical obstacle to his retirement, and never had been. It was mainly the size of his pension that was affected; and in his new life he seemed able to thrive on very little. A hundred costly substitutes for direct experience could be rejected. An intense reality, as new as it was old, was burning down on him like clear sunlight or heavenly fire or poetry.

It was only to be expected that his colleagues should shrink back a little. None the less, Stephen had been disconcerted by how far some of them had gone. They would have been very much less concerned, he fancied, had he been an acknowledged defector, about to stand trial. Such cases were now all in the day's work: there were routines to be complied with, though not too strictly. Stephen realized that his appearance was probably against him.

He was not sure what he looked like from hour to hour, and he was taking no steps to find out.

Still, the only remark that was passed, came from Toby Strand, who regularly passed remarks.

'Good God, Stephen, you're looking like death warmed up. I should go home to the wife. You don't want to pass out in this place.'

Stephen looked at him.

'Oh God, I forgot. Accept my apology.'

'That's perfectly all right, Toby,' said Stephen. 'And as for the other business, you'll be interested to learn that I've decided to retire.'

'Roll on the day for one and all,' said Toby Strand, ever the vox populi.

Mercifully, Stephen's car had been restored to a measure of health, so that the discreet bodywork gleamed slightly in the evening lustre as he drove into the rented parking space.

'Nell, we can leave at cockcrow!'

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'I forgot about buying you that dress.'

He was standing in his bath gown, looking at her in the wide bed. The whole flat was narrowing and blackening, and at that early hour the electric light was even weaker than usual.

'I shan't need a dress.'

'You must want a change sometime.'

'No. I want nothing to change.'

He gazed at her. As so often, he had no commensurate words.

'We'll stop somewhere on the way,' he said.

They packed the rehabilitated car with essentials for the simple life; with things to eat and drink on the journey and after arrival. Stephen, though proposing to buy Nell a dress, because one never knew what need might arise, was resolved against dragging her into a roadside foodplace. He took all he could, including, surreptitiously, some sad souvenirs of Elizabeth, but he recognized plainly enough that there was almost everything remaining to be done with the flat, and that he would have to return one day to do it, whether or not Nell came with him. In the meantime, it was difficult to surmount what was happening to the flat, or to him. Only Nell was sweet, calm, and changeless in her simple clothes. If only the nature of time were entirely different!

'You'll be terribly cold.'

She seemed never to say it first, never to think of it.

He covered her with sweaters and rugs. He thought of offering her a pair of his own warm trousers, but they would be so hopelessly too wide and long.

Islington was a misty marsh, as they flitted through; Holloway pink as a desert flamingo. The scholarly prison building was wrapped in fire. Finsbury Park was crystal as a steppe; Manor House deserted as old age.

When, swift as thoughts of love, they reached Grantham, they turned aside to buy Nell's dress. She chose a roughtex- tured white one, with the square neck outlined in black, and would accept nothing else, nothing else at all. She even refused to try on the dress and she refused to wear it out of the shop. Stephen concurred, not without a certain relief, and carried the dress to the car in a plastic bag. The car was so congested that a problem arose.

'I'll sit on it,' said Nell.

Thus the day went by as in a dream: though there are few such dreams in one lifetime. Stephen, for sure, had never known a journey so rapt, even though he could seldom desist from staring and squinting for uncovenanted blemishes upon and around the bright coachwork. Stephen recognized that,

like everyone else, he had spent his life without living; even though he had had Elizabeth for much of the time to help him through, as she alone was able.

Northwards, they ran into a horse fair. The horses were everywhere, and, among them, burlesques of men bawling raucously, and a few excited girls.

'Oh!' cried Nell.

'Shall we stop? '

'No,' said Nell. 'Not stop.'

She was plainly upset.

'Few fairs like that one are left,' said Stephen, as he sat intimately, eternally beside her. 'The motors have been their knell.'

'Knell,' said Nell.

Always it was impossible to judge how much she knew.

'Nell,' said Stephen affectionately. But it was at about that moment he first saw a dark, juicy crack in the polished metalwork of the bonnet.

'Nell,' said Stephen again; and clasped her hand, always brown, always warm, always living and loving. The huge geometrical trucks were everywhere, and it was an uncircumspect move for Stephen to make. But it was once more too misty for the authorities to see very much, to take evidence that could be sworn to.

The mist was more like fog as they wound through Harewood's depopulated community. Harewood really should marry Doreen as soon as it becomes possible, thought Stephen, and make a completely new start in life, perhaps have a much better type of youngster, possibly and properly for the cloth.

Stephen was struck with horror to recollect that he had forgotten all about the costly book which had been almost certainly intended for Harewood, and which Harewood would be among the very few fully to appreciate and

rejoice in. The book had not really been noticeable at first light in the eroding flat, but his lapse perturbed Stephen greatly.

'A fungus and an alga living in a mutually beneficial relationship,' he said under his breath.

'What's that? ' asked Nell.

'It's the fundamental description of a lichen. You should know that.'

'Don't talk about it.'

He saw that she shuddered; she who never even quaked from the cold.

'It's unlucky,' she said.

'I'm sorry, Nell. I was thinking of the book we left behind, and the words slipped out.'

'We're better without the book.'

'It wasn't really our book.'

'We did right in leaving it.'

He realized that it had been the second time when, without thinking, he had seemed ungracious about the big step she had taken for him: the second time at least.

Therefore, he simply answered, 'I expect so.'

He remained uneasy. He had taken due care not to drive past the crumbling rectory, but nothing could prevent the nondelivery of Harewood's expensive book being an odious default, a matter of only a few hundred yards. To confirm the guilt, a middle-aged solitary woman at the end of the settlement suddenly pressed both hands to her eyes, as if to prevent herself from seeing the passing car, even in the poor light.

The ascending track was rougher and rockier than on any of Stephen's previous transits. It was only to be expected, Stephen realized. Moreover, to mist was now added dusk. At the putative Burton's Clough, he had to take care not to drive over the edge of the declivity; and thereafter he concentrated upon not colliding with the overgrown stony waymark. Shapeless creatures were beginning to emerge which may no longer appear by daylight even in so relatively remote a region. Caution was compelled upon every count.

Thus it was full night when somehow they reached the spot where the track seemed simply to end - with no good reason supplied, as Stephen had always thought. Elizabeth would have been seriously upset if somehow she had seen at such a spot the familiar car in which she had taken so many unforgettable outings, even when a virtual invalid. She might have concluded that at long last she had reached the final bourne.

The moon, still in its third quarter, managed to glimmer, like a fragrance, through the mist; but there could be no visible stars. Stephen switched on his flash, an item of official supply.

'We don't need it,' said Nell. 'Please not.'

Nell was uncaring of cold, of storm, of fog, of fatigue. Her inner strength was superb, and Stephen loved it. But her indifference to such darkness as this reminded Stephen of her father, that wonderful entity, whom it was so unlucky ever to mention, probably even to think of. None the less, Stephen turned back the switch. He had noticed before that he was doing everything she said.

As best he could, he helped her to unload the car, and followed her along the narrow paths through the damp heather. Naturally, he could not see a trace of the house, and he suddenly realized that, though they struggled in silence, he could not even hear the gently heaving spring. They were making a pile at the spot where the house must be; and Nell never put a foot wrong in finding the pile a second, third, and even fourth time. Much of the trip was steep, and Stephen was quite winded once more by his fourth climb in almost no moonlight at all, only the faint smell of moonlight; but when, that time, he followed Nell over the tangled brow, the mist fell away for a

moment, as mist on mountains intermittently does, and at last Stephen could see the house quite clearly.

He looked at Nell standing there, pale and mysterious as the moonlight began to fade once more.

'Have you still got my letter? '

She put her hand on her breast pocket.

'Of course I have.'

They re-entered the house, for which no key was ever deemed necessary. It might be just as well, for none was available.

Stephen realized at once that what they were doing was moving into the house pretty finally; not, as he had so recently proposed, preparing to move out of it in a short time. It was clear that once Nell truly and finally entered one's life, one had simply to accept the consequences. Stephen could perceive well enough that Nell was at every point moved by forces in comparison with which he was moved by inauthentic fads. Acquiescence was the only possibility. The admixture in Nell of ignorance and wisdom, sometimes even surface sophistication, was continuously fascinating. In any case, she had left familiar surroundings and completely changed her way of life for him. He must do the same for her without end; and he wished it.

The moonlight was now insufficient to show the state of the walls or the curiously assorted furnishings or the few personal traps he had omitted to bear to London. Stephen had worn gloves to drive and had not removed them to lug. He wore them still.

None the less, when he said, 'Shall we have a light now? ' he spoke with some reluctance.

"Now,' said Nell. 'We're at home now.'

He fired up some of the rough cressets he had managed to lay hands on when he had borrowed the sottish Jarrold's Land-Rover.

Nell threw herself against him. She kissed him again and again.

As she did so, Stephen resolved to look at nothing more. To look was not necessarily to see. He even thought he apprehended a new vein of truth in what Nell had said on that second day, still only a very short time ago, about her father.

Nell went upstairs and changed into the dress he had bought her. She had done it without a hint, and he took for granted that she had done it entirely to give pleasure. In aspect, she was no longer a part of nature, merging into it, an oread. Not surprisingly, the dress did not fit very well, but on Nell it looked like a peplos. She was a sybil. Stephen was scarcely surprised. There was no need for him to see anything other than Nell's white and black robe, intuitively selected, prophetically insisted upon; quite divine, as ordinary normal girls used to say.

When he dashed off his gloves in order to caress her, he regarded only her eyes and her raiment; but later there was eating to be done, and it is difficult, in very primitive lighting, to eat without at moments noticing one's hands. These particular hands seemed at such moments to be decorated with horrid subfusc smears, quite new. Under the circumstances, they might well have come from inside Stephen's driving gloves; warm perhaps, but, like most modern products, of no precise or very wholesome origin. If ineradicable, the marks were appalling; not to be examined for a single second.

When Nell took off her new dress, Stephen saw at once (how else but at once?) that her own small single mark had vanished. She was as totally honied as harvest home, and as luscious, and as rich.

Stephen resolved that in the morning, if there was one, he would throw away all the souvenirs of Elizabeth he had brought with him. They could be scattered on the moor as ashes in a memorial garden, but better far. The eyes that were watching from behind the marks on the walls and ceilings and utensils glinted back at him, one and all. The formless left hands were his to shake.

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In the nature of things, love was nonpareil that night; and there was music too. Nell's inner being, when one knew her, when one really knew her, was as matchless as her unsullied body. Goodness is the most powerful aphrodisiac there is, though few have the opportunity of learning. Stephen had learned long before from the example of Elizabeth, and now he was learning again.

Time finally lost all power.

The music became endlessly more intimate.

'God!' cried Stephen suddenly. 'That's Schumann!' He had all but leapt in the air. Ridiculously.

'Where? ' asked Nell. Stephen realized that he was virtually sitting on her. He dragged himself up and was standing on the floor.

'That music. It's Schumann.'

'I hear no music.'

'I don't suppose you do.'

Stephen spoke drily and unkindly, as he too often did, but he knew that everything was dissolving.

For example, he could see on the dark wall the large portrait of Elizabeth by a pupil of Philip de Laszlo which had hung in their conjugal bedroom. The simulacrum was faint and ghostly, like the music, but he could see it clearly enough for present purposes, dimly self-illuminated.

He had taken that picture down with his own hands, years and years ago; and the reason had been, as he now instantly recalled, that the light paintwork had speedily become blotched and suffused. They had naturally supposed it to be something wrong with the pigments, and had spoken between themselves of vegetable dyes and the superiorities of Giotto and Mantegna. Stephen had hidden the festering canvas in the communal

basement storeroom, and had forgotten about it immediately. Now he could see it perfectly well, not over the bed, but in front of it, as always.

'Come back,' said Nell. 'Come back to me.'

The music, which once, beyond doubt, had been the music of love, was dying away. In its place, was a persistent snuffling sound, as if the house from outside, or the room from inside, was being cased by a wolf.

'What's that noise? That noise of an animal? '

'Come back to me,' said Nell. 'Come back, Stephen.' Perhaps she was quite consciously dramatizing a trifle.

He had gone to the window, but of course could see nothing save the misleading huge shapes of the flapping birds.

He went back to the bed and stretched out both his hands to Nell. He was very cold.

Though there was almost no light, Nell grasped his two hands and drew him down to her.

'You see and hear so many things, Stephen,' she said.

As she spoke, he had, for moments, a vision of a different kind.

Very lucidly, he saw Nell and himself living together, but, as it might be, in idealized form, vaguely, intensely. He knew that it was an ideal of which she was wonderfully capable, perhaps because she was still so young. All that was required of him was some kind of trust.

Held by her strong hands and arms, he leaned over her and faltered.

'But whatever animal is that? ' he demanded.

She released his hands and curled up like a child in distress. She had begun to sob.

'Oh, Nell,' he cried. He fell on her and tried to reach her. Her muscles were as iron, and he made no impression at all.

In any case, he could not stop attending to the snuffling, if that was the proper word for it. He thought it was louder now. The noise seemed quite to fill the small, low, dark, remote room; to leave no space for renewed love, however desperate the need, however urgent the case.

Suddenly, Stephen knew. A moment of insight had come to him, an instinctual happening.

He divined that outside or inside the little house was Nell's father.

It was one reason why Nell was twisted in misery and terror. Her father had his own ways of getting to the truth of things. She had said so.

Stephen sat down on the bed and put his hand on her shoulder. Though he was shivering dreadfully, he had become almost calm. The process of illumination was suggesting to him the simple truth that, for Nell too, the past must be ever present. And for her it was, in common terms, the terms after which he himself was so continuously half-aspiring, a past most absurdly recent. How could he tell what experiences were hers, parallel to, but never meeting, his own?

It would be no good even making the obvious suggestion that they should dwell far away. She could never willingly leave the moor, even if it should prove the death of her; no more than he had been able all those years to leave the flat, the job, the life, all of which he had hated, and been kept alive in only by Elizabeth.

'What's the best thing to do, Nell?' Stephen inquired of her. 'Tell me and we'll do it exactly. Tell me. I think I'm going to dress while you do so. And then perhaps you'd better dress too.'

After all, he began to think, there was little that Nell had ever said about her father or her sister which many girls might not have said when having in mind to break away. He would not have wanted a girl who had no independent judgement of her own family.

The processes of insight and illumination were serving him well, and the phantom portrait seemed to have dissipated completely. The snuffling and snorting continued. It was menacing and unfamiliar, but conceivably it was caused merely by a common or uncommon but essentially manageable creature of the moors. Stephen wished he had brought his revolver (another official issue), even though he had no experience in discharging it. He could not think how he had omitted it. Then he recollected the horrible furred-up flat, and shuddered anew, within his warm clothes.

For the first time it occurred to him that poor Elizabeth might be trying, from wherever she was, to warn him. Who could tell that Harriet had not made a miraculous recovery (she was, after all, in touch with many different faiths); and was not now ready once more to accept him for a spell into the life at the rectory?

Nell was being very silent.

Stephen went back to the bed.

'Nell.'

He saw that she was not in the bed at all, but standing by the door.

'Nell.'

'Hush,' she said. 'We must hide.'

'Where do we do that? '

'I shall show you. He could see that she was back in her shirt and trousers; a part of the natural scene once more. Her white dress glinted on the boards of the floor.

To Stephen her proposal seemed anomalous. If it really was her father outside, he could penetrate everywhere, and according to her own statement. If it was a lesser adversary, combat might be better than concealment.

Nell and Stephen went downstairs in the ever more noisy darkness, and Nell, seemingly without effort, lifted a stone slab in the kitchen floor. Stephen could not quite make out how she had done it. Even to find the right slab, under those conditions, was a feat.

'All the houses have a place like this,' Nell explained.

'Why?' inquired Stephen. Surely Nell's father was an exceptional phenomenon? Certainly the supposed motion of him was akin to no other motion Stephen had ever heard.

'To keep their treasure,' said Nell.

'You are my treasure,' said Stephen.

'You are mine,' responded Nell.

There were even a few hewn steps, or so they felt to him. Duly it was more a coffer than a room, Stephen apprehended; but in no time Nell had the stone roof down on them, almost with a flick of the elbow, weighty though the roof must have been.

Now the darkness was total; something distinctly different from the merely conventional darkness above. All the same, Stephen of all people could not be unaware that the stone sides and stone floor and stone ceiling of the apartment were lined with moss and lichen. No doubt he had developed sixth and seventh senses in that arena, but the odour could well have sufficed of itself.

'How do we breathe? '

'There is a sort of pipe. That's where the danger lies.'

'You mean it might have become blocked up?'

'No.'

He did not care next to suggest that it might now be blocked deliberately. He had already made too many tactless suggestions of that kind.

She saved him the trouble of suggesting anything. She spoke in the lowest possible voice.

'He might come through.'

It was the first time she had admitted, even by implication, who it was: outside or inside - or both. Stephen fully realized that. It was difficult for him not to give way to the shakes once more, but he clung to the vague possibilities he had tried to sort out upstairs.

'I should hardly think so,' he said. 'But how long do you suggest we wait? '

'It will be better when it's day. He has to eat so often.'

It would be utterly impossible for Stephen to inquire any further; not at the moment. He might succeed in finding his way to the bottom of it all later. He was already beginning to feel cramped, and the smell of the fungi and the algae were metaphorically choking him and the moss realistically tickling him; but he put his arm round Nell in the blackness, and could even feel his letter safe against her soft breast.

She snuggled back at him; as far as circumstances permitted. He had only a vague idea of how big or small their retreat really was.

Nell spoke again in that same lowest possible voice. She could communicate, even in the most pitchy of blackness, while hardly making a sound.

'He's directly above us. He's poised.'

Stephen mustered up from his school days a grotesque recollection of some opera: the final scene. The Carl Rosa had done it: that one scene only; after the film in a cinema near Marble Arch. Elizabeth had thought the basic operatic convention too far-fetched to be taken seriously; except perhaps for Mozart, who could always be taken seriously.

'I love you,' said Stephen. No doubt the chap in the opera had said something to the like effect, but had taken more time over it.

Time: that was always the decisive factor. But time had been mastered at last.

'I love *you*,' said Nell, snuggling ever closer; manifesting her feeling in every way she could.

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Curiously enough, it was at the verge of the small, lustrous pool that Stephen's body was ultimately found.

A poor old man, apparently resistent to full employment and even to the full security that goes with it, found the corpse, though, after all those days or weeks, the creatures and forces of the air and of the moor had done their worst to it, or their best. There was no ordinary skin anywhere. Many people in these busy times would not even have reported the find.

There were still, however, folk who believed, or at least had been told that the pool was bottomless; and even at the inquest a theory was developed that Stephen had been wandering about on the moor and had died of sudden shock upon realizing at what brink he stood. The coroner, who was a doctor of medicine, soon disposed of that hypothesis.

None the less, the actual verdict had to be open; which satisfied nobody. In these times, people expect clear answers; whether right or wrong.

Harewood, almost his pristine self by then, inquired into the possibility of a memorial service in London, which he was perfectly prepared to come up and conduct. After all, Stephen was an OBE already, and could reasonably hope for more.

The view taken was that Stephen had been missing for so long, so entirely out of the official eye, that the proper moment for the idea was regrettably, but irreversibly, past.

The funeral took place, therefore, in Harewood's own church, where the father and the grandfather of both the deceased and the officiant had

shepherded so long with their own quiet distinction. People saw that no other solution had ever really been thinkable.

Doreen had by now duly become indispensible to the rector; in the mysterious absence of Stephen, to whom the rector had specifically allotted that function. At the funeral, she was the only person in full black. Not even the solitary young man from the Ministry emulated her there. It had not been thought appropriate to place Stephen's OBE on the coffin, but during the service the rector noticed a scrap of lichen thereon which was different entirely, he thought, from any of the species on the walls, rafters, and floors of the church. Performing his office, Harewood could not at once put a name to the specimen. The stuff that already lined the open grave was even more peculiar; and Harewood was more than a little relieved when the whole affair was finally over, the last tributes paid, and he free to stumble back to Doreen's marmite toast, and lilac peignoir. The newest number of the Journal had come in only just before, but Harewood did not so much as open it that evening.

As Stephen's will had been rendered ineffective by Elizabeth's decease, Harewood, as next of kin, had to play a part, whether he felt competent or not, in winding everything up. Fortunately, Doreen had been taking typing lessons, and had bought a second-hand machine with her own money.

The flat was found to be in the most shocking state, almost indescribable. It was as if there had been no visitors for years; which, as Harewood at once pointed out, had almost certainly been more or less the case, since the onset of Elizabeth's malady, an epoch ago.

A single, very unusual book about Harewood's own speciality was found. It had been published in a limited edition: a minute one, and at a price so high that Harewood himself had not been among the subscribers.

'Poor fellow!' said Harewood. 'I never knew that he was really interested. One can make such mistakes.'

The valuable book had of course to be disposed of for the benefit of the estate.

Stephen's car was so far gone that it could be sold only for scrap; but, in the event, it never was sold at all, because no one could be bothered to drag it away. If one knows where to look, one can see the bits of it still.

Mark Ingestre: The Customer's Tale (1980)

I met an old man at the Elephant Theatre, and, though it was not in a pub that we met, we soon found ourselves in one, not in the eponymous establishment, but in a nice, quiet little place down a side turn, which he seemed to know well, but of which, naturally, I knew nothing, since I was only in that district on business, and indeed had been in the great metropolis itself only for a matter of weeks. I may perhaps at the end tell you what the business was. It had some slight bearing upon the old man's tale.

"The Customer's Tale" I call it, because the Geoffrey Chaucer implication may not be far from the truth: a total taradiddle of legend and first-hand experience. As we grow older we frequently become even hazier about the exact chronology of history, and about the boundaries of what is deemed to be historical fact: the king genuinely and sincerely believing that he took part in the Battle of Waterloo; Clement Attlee, after he was made an earl, never doubting that he had the wisdom of Walpole. Was Jowett Ramsey's Lord Chancellor of Clem's? Which one of us can rightly remember that? Well: the old man was a very old man, very old indeed; odd-looking and hairy; conflating one whole century with another whole century, and then sticking his own person in the center of it all, possibly before he was even born.

That first evening, there was, in the nature of things, only a short time before the pubs closed. But we met in the same place again by appointment; and again; and possibly a fourth time, too. That is something I myself cannot exactly recollect; but after that last time, I never saw or heard of him again. I wonder whether anyone did.

I wrote down the old man's tale in my beautiful new shorthand, lately acquired at the college. He was only equal to short installments, but I noticed that, old though he was, he seemed to have no difficulty in picking up each time more or less where he left off. I wrote it all down almost

exactly as he spoke it, though of course when I typed it out, I had to punctuate it myself, and no doubt I tidied it up a trifle. For what anyone cares to make of it, here it is.

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Fleet Street! If you've only seen it as it is now, you've no idea of what it used to be. I refer to the time when Temple Bar was still there. Fleet Street was never the same after Temple Bar went. Temple Bar was something they simply couldn't replace. Men I knew, and knew well, said that taking it away wrecked not only Fleet Street but the whole City. Perhaps it was the end of England itself. God knows what else was.

It wasn't just the press in those days. All that Canadian newsprint, and those seedy reporters. I don't say you're seedy yet, but you will be. Just give it time. Even a rich journalist has to be seedy. Then there were butchers' shops, and poultry and game shops, and wine merchants passing from father to son, and little places on corners where you could get your watch mended or your old pens sharpened, and proper bookshops too, with everything from *The Complete John Milton* to *The Condemned Man's Last Testimony*. Of course the "Newgate Calendar" was still going at that time, though one wasn't supposed to care for it. There were a dozen or more pawnbrokers, and all the churches had bread-and-blanket charities. Fancy Fleet Street with only one pawnbroker and all the charity money gone God knows where and better not ask! The only thing left is that little girl dressed as a boy out of Byron's poem. Little Medora. We used to show her to all the new arrivals. People even *lived* in Fleet Street in those days. Thousands of people. Tens of thousands. Some between soft sheets, some on the hard stones. Fancy that! There was room for all, prince and pauper; and women and to spare for almost the lot of them.

Normally, I went round the back, but I remember the first time I walked down Fleet Street itself. It was not a thing you would forget, as I am about to tell you. There were great wagons stuck in the mud, at least I take it to have been mud; and lawyers all over the pavement, some clean, some not. Of course, the lawyers stow themselves away more now. Charles Dickens had something to do with that. And then there were the women I've spoken of: some of them blowsy and brassy, but some soft and appealing, even

when they had nothing to deck themselves with but shawls and rags. I took no stock in women at that time. You know why as well as I do. There are a few things that never change. Never. I prided myself upon living clean. Well, I did until that same day. When that day came, I had no choice.

How did I get into the barbershop? I wish I could tell you. I've wondered every time I've thought about the story, and that's been often enough. All I know is that it wasn't to get my hair cut, or to be shaved, and not to be bled either, which was still going on in those days, the accepted thing when you thought that something was the matter with you or were told so, though you didn't set about it in a barbershop if you could afford something better. They took far too much at the barber's. "Bled white" meant something in places of that kind. You can take my word about that.

It's perfectly true that I have always liked my hair cut close, and I was completely clean-shaven as well until I suffered a gash from an assegai when fighting for Queen and Country. You may not believe that, but it's true. I first let this beard grow only to save her Majesty embarrassment, and it's been growing and growing ever since.

As a matter of fact, it was my mother that cut my hair in those days. She knew how I liked it and how she liked it. She was as thorough as you can imagine, but all the while kissing and joking too. That went on until the episode I am telling you about. Never again afterward.

Often she had been shaving me too; using my dead father's old razors, of which there were dozens and dozens. I never knew my father. I never even saw a likeness of him. I think my mother had destroyed them all, or hidden them away. If ever I asked her about him, she al-ways spoke in the same way. "I prefer you, Paul," she said. "You are the better man. I have nothing to add." Always the same words, or nearly the same. Then she would kiss me very solemnly on the lips, so that there was nothing I could do but change the subject.

How, then, could I possibly have entered that shop? I have an idea that the man was standing outside and simply caught hold of me. That often happened, so that you had to take trouble in looking after yourself. But, as I have told you, I truly do not know. I suspect that things happen from time to

time to everyone that they don't understand, and there's simply nothing we can do about them.

I was in the chair immediately, and the man seemed to be clipping at my locks and lathering my face, both at the same time. I daresay he had applied a whiff of chloroform, which, at that period, was something quite new. People always spoke about a whiff of it, as if it had been a Ramón Allones or a Larraniaga.

There were three chairs in the shop, but the man had firmly directed me to a particular one, the one to my left, because that was the one where the light was, or so I supposed was the reason. The man had an assistant, it seemed, in case the shop might suddenly be packed out. The assistant struck me as being pretty well all black, after the style of a Negro, but that might have been only because the whole shop was so dark and smoky. In any case, he could only have been about four feet two inches high, or even less. I wondered how he managed at the chairs. Probably, when at work, he had a box to stand on. All he did now was lean back against the announcements in the far-right-hand corner, waiting until he was needed. The master was as tall as the assistant was short, lean and agile as a daddy longlegs. Also, he was completely clean-shaven and white. One could not help wondering whether anything grew at all, or ever had. Even his hair could well have been some kind of wig. I am sure that it was. It was black and slightly curly and horribly neat. I didn't have my eyes on the pair of them for very long, but I can see them both at this very moment, though, in the case of the assistant, without much definition. Sometimes we can see more without definition than with it. On the marble slab in front of me was a small lighted oil lamp and a single burning candle, smoking heavily, and submerging the other smells. This in the very middle of an ordinary weekday morning. Probably, of course, it was only imitation marble. Probably everything in the shop was an imitation of some kind.

Having your hair cut at that time cost only a few pence, though there was a penny or two more for the tip; and being shaved was often a matter of "Leave it to you, sir." But I knew nothing of that, because, as I have said, I had never had either thing done to me for money in a shop. I began to count up in my head how much I might have in my pocket. I had already begun to

support my mother, and, in the nature of things, it can't have been a large sum. Frightening ideas ran about my mind as to how much might be demanded of me. It seemed almost as if I were being treated to everything that the shop had to offer. I tried not to think of what might happen were I unable to pay in full.

At one time, the man was holding a bright silvery razor in either hand, which I suppose had its own logic from a commercial point of view. The razors seemed far shinier than those at home. Reflections from the two of them flashed across the ceiling and walls. The razors also seemed far sharper than ours, as was only to be expected. I felt that if an ear were to be streaked off, I should be aware of it because I should see the blood; but that my whole head could go in a second, without my knowing anything at all about it—ever again, of course. I knew how small my head was, and how long and thin my neck. In the mirror I could see something of what was in hand, but not very much, because the mirror was caked and blackened, quite unlike the flickering razors. I doubted whether blood could have been made out in it, even a quite strong flow. I might well see the blood itself, long before the reflection of it.

But the worst thing came suddenly from behind me. Having no knowledge of what went on in these shops, I had never heard about the practice, then taken for granted, of "singeing." The customers regularly used to have the ends of their hair burnt off with a lighted taper. I don't suppose you've even heard of it happening, but it went on until fairly recently, and it only stopped because the shops couldn't get the trained assistant. It was said to "seal" the hairs, as if they had been letters. All that may sound like a good joke, but the thing itself was not at all like a joke.

It was of course the dusky assistant who was doing it—though it suddenly struck me that it might be a disease he had, rather than his natural colouring, perhaps something linked with his being so short. All I know is, and this I can swear to you, that he did not light the taper he held, at either the candle or the lamp. At one moment the bright light behind me was not there, or the assistant there, either. At the next moment the light was so strong and concentrated that, even in the dirty mirror, the reflection was dazzling me.

I think that really it was hypnotizing me. Hypnotism was something else that was fairly new at the time. It wasn't even necessary for the two in the shop to set about it deliberately. The idea of being hypnotized was in the air and fashionable, as different things are at different times. People suddenly went off who would have felt nothing at all a few years earlier.

I felt that my whole body was going round and round like a catherine wheel, feet against head. I felt that my head itself was going round and round in the other dimension, horizontally, so to speak, but faster. At that age, hypnotism had never actually come my way, even though it was being joked about everywhere. As well as all this, there was a sound like a great engine turning over. I think that really I lost myself for a short spell. Fainting was much commoner in those times than it is now, and not only with young girls. What it felt like was a sudden quick fall, with all my blood rushing upward. There were effects on the stage of that kind: clowns with baubles going down through trap-doors and coming up again as demons with pitchforks. They don't show it on the stage anymore, or not so often.

When I came round I was somewhere quite different. Don't ask me exactly how it had come about. Or exactly where I was, for that matter. I can only tell you what happened.

The first thing I knew was a strong smell of cooking.

Baking was what it really smelt like. Everyone at that time knew what baking smelt like, and I more than most, because my mother baked everything—bread, puddings, pies, the lot, even the cat food. I supposed I was down in the cellar of the building. Anyway, I was in some cellar. Of course, the kitchen quarters were always in what was called the basement, when the house was good enough to *have* a basement. So the smell was perfectly natural and acceptable.

The only thing was that the place seemed so terribly hot. I thought at first that it might be me, rather than the room, but that became hard to believe.

I was sprawled on a thick mattress. It seemed just as well, and kind of someone, because the floor as a whole was made of stone, not even smooth

stone, not smooth at all, but rough. There was enough light for me to see that much. My mattress was considerably fatter than the ones given to the felons in Newgate or to the poorer debtors, and it was most welcome, as I say, but the stuff inside was peeping out everywhere through rents, and the color of the thing was no longer very definite, except that there were marks on it which were almost certainly blood.

I put my hand to my head, but I didn't seem to be actually bleeding through the hair, though it was hard to be sure, as I was sweating so heavily. Then I gave a gulp, like a schoolboy. I suppose I was still more or less a schoolboy. Anyway, I nearly fainted all over again.

At the other end of the cellar, if that is what the place was, a huge woman was sitting on a big painted chair, like a throne. The light in the place came from a small lamp on a kind of desk at her side. She had heavy dark hair falling over one shoulder, and a swarthy face, as if she had been a Spanish woman. She wore a dark dress, open all the way down the front to the waist, as if she had just put it on, or could not bear to fasten it owing to the heat, or had been doing some remarkably heavy work. Not that I had ever before seen a woman looking quite like that, not even my mother, when we were alone together. And there was a young girl sitting at her feet, with her head in the woman's lap, so that I could see only that she had dark hair, too, as if she had been the woman's daughter, which of course one would have supposed she was, particularly as the woman was all the time stroking and caressing the girl's hair.

The woman gazed across the cellar at me for some time before she uttered a word. Her eyes were as dark as everything else about her, but they looked very bright and luminous at the same time. Of course, I was little more than a kid, but that was how it all seemed to me. Immediately our eyes met, the woman's and mine, something stirred within me, something quite new and strong. This, although the light was so poor. Or perhaps at first it was because of the poor light, like what I said about sometimes seeing more when there is no definition than when there is.

I couldn't utter a word. I wasn't very used to the company of women, in any case. I hadn't much wished for it, as I have said.

So she spoke first. Her voice was as dark as her hair and her eyes. A deep voice. But all she said was: "How old are you?"

"Seventeen and a half, ma'am. A bit more than that, actually."

"So you are still a minor?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Do you live in the City of London?"

"No, ma'am."

"Where then do you live?"

"In South Clerkenwell, ma'am."

"But you work in the city of London?"

"No, ma'am. I only come to the city on errands."

In those days, we were taught at school how to reply to catechisms of this kind. I had been taught such things very carefully. I must say *that* whatever else I might have to say about education in general. We were told to reply always simply, briefly, and directly. We used to be given exercises and practices.

I must add that the woman was well-spoken, and that she had a highly noticeable mouth. Of course, my faculties were not at their best in all that heat and after the series of odd things that had been happening to me: complete novelties, at that age.

"Whom do you visit on these errands?"

"Mostly people in the backstreets and side streets. We're only in a small way so far." It was customary for everyone who worked for a firm to describe that firm as "we," provided the firm was small enough, and sometimes not only then. With us, even the boozy women who cleaned everything up did it.

"Hardly heard of in the wider world, we might say?"

"I think that could be said, ma'am." I had learned well that boasting was always idle, and led only to still closer interrogation.

"Are your parents living?"

"My father is supposed to be dead, ma'am."

She transfixed me. I was mopping at myself all the time.

"I *think* he's dead, ma'am."

"Was he, or is he, a sailor, or a horsebreaker, or a strolling player, or a hawker?"

"None of those, ma'am."

"A Gay Lothario, perhaps?"

"I don't know, ma'am."

She was gazing at me steadily, but she apparently decided to drop the particular topic. It was a topic I specially disliked, and her dropping it so easily gave me the impression that I had begun to reach her, as well as she me. You know how it can happen. What hypnotism was then, telepathy is now. It's mostly a complete illusion, of course.

"And your mother? Was she pretty?"

"I think she still is pretty, ma'am."

"Describe her as best you can."

"She's very tiny and very frail, ma'am."

"Do you mean she's ill?"

"I don't think she's ill, ma'am."

"Do you dwell with her?"

"I do, ma'am."

"Could she run from end to end of your street, loudly calling out? If the need were to arise. Only then, of course. What do you say?"

At this strange question, the girl on the floor, who had hitherto been still as still, looked up into the woman's face. The woman began to stroke the girl's face and front, though from where I was I could see neither. Besides, it was so hot for caresses.

"I doubt it, ma'am. I hope the need does not arise." We were taught not to make comments, but I could hardly be blamed, I thought, for that one.

"Are you an only child?"

"My sister died, ma'am."

"The family diathesis seems poor, at least on the female side."

I know now that this is what she said, because since then I've worked hard at language and dictionaries and expressing myself, but I did not know then.

"Beg pardon, ma'am?"

But the woman left that topic, too.

"Does your mother know where you are now?"

At school, it might have been taken as rather a joke of a question, but I answered it seriously and accurately.

"She never asks how I spend the day, ma'am."

"You keep yourselves to yourselves?"

"I don't wish my mother to be fussed about me, ma'am."

Here the woman actually looked away for a moment. By now her doing so had a curious effect on me. I should find it difficult to put it into words. I suddenly began to feel queasy. For the first time, I became aware physically of the things that had been happening to me. I longed to escape, but feared for myself if I succeeded.

The woman's eyes came back to me. I could not but go out to meet her.

"Are you or your mother the stronger person?"

"My mother is, ma'am."

"I don't mean physically."

"No, ma'am."

The hot smell, familiar to me as it was, and for that reason all the more incongruous, seemed to have become more overpowering. It was perhaps a part of my newly regained faculties. I had to venture upon a question of my own. At home it was the customary question. It was asked all the time.

"Should not the oven be turned down a little, ma'am?"

The woman never moved a muscle, not even a muscle in her dark eyes. She simply replied "Not yet." But for the first time she smiled at me, and straight at me.

What more could be said on the subject? I knew that overheated ovens burned down houses.

The catechism was resumed.

"How much do you know of women?"

I am sure I blushed, and I am sure that I could make no reply. Our exercises had not included such questions, and I was all but dying of the heat and smell.

"How close have you dared to go?"

I could not withdraw my eyes, though there was nothing that part of me could more deeply wish to do. I hated to be mocked. Mockery was the one thing that could really make me lose control, go completely wild.

"Have you never been close even to your own mother?"

I must all the while have looked more like a turkey than most because my head was so small. You may not allow for that, because it's so much larger now.

You will have gathered that the woman had been drooling slightly, as women do when appealing in a certain way to a man. As I offered no response, she spoke up quite briskly.

"So much the better for all of us," she said, but this time without a trace of the smile that usually goes with remarks of that kind. Then she added, "So much the better for the customers."

I was certainly not going to inquire what she meant, though I had no idea what I was going to do. Events simply had to take their course, as so often in life, though one is always taught otherwise.

Events immediately began to do so. The woman stood up. I could see that the chair, which at first seemed almost like a throne, was in fact hammered together from old sugar boxes and packing cases. The coloring on the outside of it, which had so impressed me, looked much more doubtful now.

"Let's see what you can make of Monica and me," said the woman.

At that the little girl turned to me for the first time. She was a moon-faced child, so pale that it was hard to believe so swarthy a woman could possibly be her mother.

I'm not going to tell you how I replied to what the woman had said. Old though I am, I should still hesitate to do so.

There was a certain amount of dialogue between us.

One factor was that heat. When Monica came to me and started trying to take off my jacket, I could not help feeling a certain relief, even though men, just as much as women, were then used to wearing far heavier clothes, even when it was warm.

Another factor was the woman's bright and steady gaze, though there you will simply think I am making excuses.

Another factor again was that the woman had unlocked something within me that my mother had said should please never be unlocked, never, until she herself had passed away. It was disloyal, but there's usually disloyalty somewhere when one is drawn in that way to a person, and more often than not in several quarters at once.

I did resist. I prevaricated. I did not prevail. I leave it there. I don't know how fond and dutiful you proved at such a time in the case of your own mother.

Monica seemed sweet and gentle, though she never spoke a word. It did, I fear, occur to me that she was accustomed to what she was doing; a quite long and complicated job in those days, which only married ladies and mothers knew about among women. Monica's own dress was made simply of sacking. It was an untrimmed sack. I realized at once that almost certainly she was wearing nothing else. Who could wonder in such heat? Her arms and legs and neck and round face were all skinny to the point of pathos, and white and slimy with the heat. But her hands were gentle, as I say. In the bad light, I could make nothing of her eyes. They seemed soft and blank.

The woman was just standing and gazing and waiting. Her arms rested at her sides, and once more she was quite like a queen, though her dress was still open all down the front to the waist. Of course that made an effect of its own kind too. It was a dark velvet dress, I should say, with torn lace around the neck and around the ends of the sleeves. I could see that she was as bare-footed as little Monica, but that by no means diminished her dignity. She was certainly at her ease, though she was certainly not smiling. She was like a queen directing a battle. Only the once had she smiled; in response to

my silly remark about turning down the oven; when I had failed to find the right and unfunny words for what I had meant, and meant so well.

I could now see that the solitary lamp stood on a mere rough ledge rather than on any kind of desk. For that matter, the lamp itself was of a standard and very inexpensive pattern. It was equipped with a movable shade to direct the weak illumination. My mother and I owned a dozen lamps better than that, and used them too, on many, many occasions.

In the end, Monica had me completely naked. She was a most comfortable and competent worker, and, because there was nowhere else to put them, she laid out all my different things neatly on the rough floor, where they looked extremely foolish, as male bits and pieces always do, when not being worn, and often when being worn also.

I stood there gasping and sweating and looking every bit as ridiculous as my things. It is seldom among the most commanding moments in the life of a man. One can see why so many men are drawn to rape and such. Otherwise, if the woman has any force in her at all, the man is at such an utter disadvantage. He is lucky if he doesn't remain so until the end of it. But I don't need to tell you. You'll have formed your own view.

There was no question of that woman lacking a thing. It was doubtless grotesque that I had assented to Monica stripping me, but as soon as Monica had finished, and was moving things about on the floor to make the total effect look even neater, the woman rotated the shade on the lamp, so that the illumination fell on the other end of the cellar, the end that had formerly been in the darkness behind her.

At once she was shedding her velvet dress (yes, it was velvet, I am sure of it) and, even at the time, it struck me as significant that she had put herself in the limelight, so to speak, in order to do so, instead of hiding behind a curtain as most women would have done, more then than now, I believe.

She too proved to be wearing no more than the one garment. Who could wear chemises and drawers and stays in that atmosphere?

The light showed that beneath and around the woman's feet, and I must tell you that they were handsome, well-shaped feet, was a tangle of waste hair, mingled with fur and hide, such as the rag and bone men used to cry, and refuse to pay a farthing for, however earnestly the women selling the stuff might appeal. By no stretch of drink or poetry could one call the heap of it a bed or couch. Our cat would have refused to go near it, let alone lie on it.

None of that made the slightest difference; no more than the heat, the smell, the mystery, or anything else.

The woman, with no clothes on, and with her unleashed hair, was very fine, though no longer a queen. "Let's see," she said, and half-extended her arms toward me.

A real queen might have expressed herself more temptingly, but being a queen is very much a matter of wearing the clothes, as is being a woman. The matter was settled by little Monica giving me a push from behind.

It made me look even more ridiculous, because I fell across the sugar-box throne. In fact, I cut my bare thigh badly. But a flow of blood made no difference in that company, and in a second or two I was wallowing egregiously amid the woman's dark hair and the soft mass of hair and fur from God knows where, and Monica had come in from behind, and begun to help things on.

Almost at once, I became aware of something about Monica, which is scarcely polite to talk about. I only mention it for a reason. The thing was that she herself had no hair, where, even at that time, I knew she should have had hair, she being, I was fairly certain, old enough for it. I refer to that personal matter because it gave me an idea as to who might be Monica's father. On Monica's round head, locks just hung straight around her face, as if they had stopped growing prematurely, and everyone was waiting for them to continue. I began to wonder if there were not some kind of stuck-on wig. I still doubted whether the woman who held me tight was Monica's mother, but for the moment there were other things to think about, especially by such a novice as I was.

There seems to be only one thing worth adding to a scene which you must find obvious enough.

It is that never since have I known a mouth like that woman's mouth. But the entire escapade was of course my first full experience—the first time I was able to go through the whole thing again and again until I was spent and done, sold and paid for.

I suppose I should also say that it was good to have Monica there as well, scrappy though she was, a bit like an undernourished fish. Monica knew many things that she should not have known, and which you can't talk most grown women into bothering about. You'll have come upon what I mean for yourself.

With the two of them, one didn't feel a fool. I even forgot about the heat. I simply can't remember how the woman and Monica managed about that. Perhaps I didn't even notice. I daresay there were creatures making a happy home for themselves in the vast pile of ancient warmth. I should have thought there would have been, but I didn't worry about it at the time. Over the heap, on the dirty wall, was a black-and-white engraving of an old man whose face I knew, because he had been hanged for political reasons. Every now and then, I could see him winking at me through the murk, though I was too pressed to recall his name just then. You remember my telling you that I couldn't keep my hands off the Newgate Calendar and all that went with it. I think his was the only picture in the room.

I keep calling it a room. What else can one call it? A gigantic rathole, a sewage-overflow chamber, a last resting place for all the world's shorn hair? For me it was an abode of love. My first. Maybe my last.

The woman's hair just smelt of itself. The waste hair was drawn into one's nose and mouth and eyes, even into one's ears, into one's body everywhere. Monica, I believe, had no hair. The tatters of known and unknown fur insinuated themselves between her and me, as if they had been alive. They tickled and chafed but I never so much as tried to hold them back. Joy was all my care, for as long as the appointment lasted.

At the time, it seemed to last more or less for ever. But of course I had no comparisons. The woman and Monica set themselves to one thing after another. Sometimes in turn. Sometimes together. I was half-asphyxiated with heat and hair. I was wet and slimy as a half-skinned eel. I was dead to everything but the precise, immediate half-second. Like the Norseman, I had discovered a new world.

In the end, the woman began tangling her fragrant hair round my crop. I've told you that my neck was like a turkey's in those days. Stringy and very slender.

I am sure that the sweet scent of her hair came from nothing she put on it. In any case, the shop had not struck me as going out for the ladies. For what she was doing, she did not need to have especially long hair either. The ordinary length of hair among women would serve perfectly well. The ordinary length in those days. From what had gone before, I guessed that part of the whole point lay in the tangling process bringing her great mouth harder and tighter than ever against mine. Hair that was too long might have defeated that.

At first the sensation was enough to wake the dead. And by then, as you will gather, that was just about what was needed.

Then it was as if there was a vast shudder in the air. At which the entire spell broke. Nothing had ever taken me more completely by surprise.

It can always be one of the most upsetting experiences in the world, as you may have learned for yourself. I don't know whether it comes worse when one is fully worked up or when the whole miserable point is that one is not.

But that time there was something extra. You won't believe this: I saw a vision of my mother.

She was just standing there, looking tiny and sad, with her arms at her sides, as the woman's had been, and with her own dignity, too. My mother was not wringing her hands or tearing at her wisps of hair or anything fanciful like that. She was just standing very still and looking as if she were a queen, too,

a different sort of queen naturally, and this time on the scaffold. That idea of a queen on the scaffold came to me at once.

Until that moment, the huge dark woman had been powerful enough to do exactly what she liked with me. Now, at the first effort I exerted, I broke clean away from her and her hair, and rolled backward on top of Monica. I knew that I had, in fact, dragged a big hank of the woman's hair right away from her head. I could not be mistaken about that because the hank was in my hand. I threw it back among the rest.

I positively leapt to my feet, but even before that the woman was standing, her feet among the garbage, and with a knife in her hand. It was not one of the slim blades that in those days ladies carried in their garters for safety. This lady wore no garters. It was a massive working knife, of the kind employed by butchers who are on the heavier side of the trade. If there had been a little more light, its reflections would have flashed over the walls and ceiling as had happened with the hairdresser's razors.

Monica had climbed up too. She stood between us shuddering and shivering and fishy.

The woman did not come for me. She stepped elegantly across the room, across the place, to the door, and leaned back against it. That was her mistake.

When Monica had undressed me, she could easily have robbed me. I was soon to discover that she had taken nothing. That had been a mistake too.

My few sovereigns and half sovereigns were in a sovereign case, left behind by my father, and among the things given me by my mother when I was confirmed. My other coins were in a purse that had been knitted for me with my name on it. A poor orphan girl named Athene had done that. But there was something else that Monica might have found if she had been tricky enough to look. Wherever I went in those days, I always carried a small pistol. It had been the very first thing I bought with my own money, apart from penny broadsheets and sticks of gob. Even my mother had no idea I possessed it. I did not want her to grieve and fret about what things were like for me in the highways of the world.

She never knew I had it.

Down in that place, the pistol was in my hand more swiftly than thought in my head.

The woman, for her part, gave no time to thinking, or to trying to treat with me. She simply took a leap at me, like a fierce Spanish bull, or a wild Spanish gypsy. There was nothing I could do but allow the pistol to speak for me. I had never discharged it before, except in play on the Heath at night.

I killed the woman. I suppose I am not absolutely certain of that, but I think so. Monica began to whimper and squirm about.

The heat made dressing myself doubly terrible.

I had to decide what to do with Monica. I can truly say that I should have liked very much to rescue her, but I had to drop the idea as impracticable. Apart from everything else, quite a good lot else, I could never have brought her to my home.

I never even kissed her good-bye, or tried in any way to comfort her. I felt extremely bad about that. I still do. It was terrible.

The door opened to me at once, though I had to step over the woman's body to reach it.

Outside, a stone passage ran straight before me to another door, through the glass panels of which I could see daylight. The reek and savor of baking was overwhelming, and the heat, if possible, worse than ever. There were other doors on both sides of the passage. I took it that they led to the different ovens, but I left them unopened.

The door ahead was locked, but the key was on my side of it. Turning it caused me considerable trouble. It called for a knack, and my eyes were full of sweat and my hands beginning to tremble. Nor of course had I any idea what or who might be on the other side of the door. The panels were of

obscured glass, but it seemed to me that too little light came through them for the door to open onto the outer world.

Before long, I managed it, perhaps with the new strength I had acquired from somewhere or other. No one had as yet appeared at my rear. I think that, apart from Monica, I was alone down there; and, at that moment, I preferred not to think about Monica.

I flung the door open and found myself in a small, empty, basement shop. It had a single window onto an area; and, beside it, a door. When I say that the shop was empty (and just as well for me that it was), I mean also that it seemed to contain no stock. Nothing at all. There was a small, plain counter, and at the back of it tiers of wooden shelves, all made of dingy polished deal, and all bare as in the nursery rhyme. Brightly colored advertisements were coming in then for the different products, but there was not a bill or a poster in that shop. Nor was there anything like a list of prices, or even a chair for the more decrepit purchasers. I think there was a bit of linoleum on the floor. Nothing more.

I paused long enough to trail my finger down the counter. At least the place seemed to be kept clean, because no mark was left either on the counter or on my finger.

In the shop it was not so hot as in the rest of the establishment, but it was quite hot enough. When later I was allowed to look into a condemned cell, it reminded me of that shop.

But I now had the third door to tackle, the outer door, that might or might not lead to freedom. It looked as if it would, but I had been through too much to be at all sure of anything.

As quietly as I could, I drew the two bolts. They seemed to be in frequent use, because they ran back smoothly. I had expected worse trouble than ever with the lock, but, would you believe it? when the bolts had been drawn, the door simply opened of itself. The protruding part of the lock no longer quite reached into the socket. Perhaps the house was settling slightly. Not that there was any question of seeing much. Outside it was simply the usual, narrow, dirty street with high buildings, and a lot of life going on. A bit of a

slum, in fact. Most streets were in those days. That was before the concrete had taken everything over.

I couldn't manage to shut the door. As far as could be seen, one had to be inside to do that. I soon dropped it and started to creep up the area steps. The steps were very worn. Really dangerous for the older people.

For some reason it had never occurred to me that the area gate might be locked, but this time it was. And this time, naturally, there was no key on either side. The area railing was too spiky and too high for me to leap lightly across, even though I was a very long and lanky lad at that time. I was feeling a bit faint as well. For the third time.

A boy came up, dragging a handcart full of stuff from the builders' merchants. He addressed me.

"Come out from under the piecrust, have yer?"

"Which crust?"

The delivery boy pointed over my shoulder. I looked behind me and saw that over the basement door was a sign. It read "Mrs. Lovat's Pie Shop."

At once I thought of the man's name in the picture downstairs. Simon, Lord Lovat. Of course. But Lord Lovat hadn't been hanged, not even with a silken rope. He had been beheaded. Now I should have to think quickly.

"You're wrong," I said to the boy. "I went in to get my hair cut and by mistake came out at the back."

"You were lucky to come out at all," said the boy.

"How's that?" I asked, though I wasn't usually as ready as all this suggests. Not in those days.

"Ask no questions and you'll be told no fibs," said the boy.

"Well," I said, "help me to get out of it."

The boy looked at me. I didn't care for his look.

"I'll watch out for the bobby," said the boy. "He'll help you."

And I had to slip him something before he let me borrow four of his bricks to stand upon on my side of the railing and four to alight upon the other side. I slipped him a whole five shillings; half as much as his wages for the week in those days. I had taken the place of the barber's assistant who would have had to stand on a box.

After I had helped the boy put the bricks back in his cart, I lost myself in the crowd, as the saying goes. Apart from everything else, I had aroused suspicion by overtipping.

I never heard another thing. Well, not for a very long time, and then not in a personal way.

But I had temporarily lost my appetite for criminal literature. I became out of touch with things for a while. I suffered not only for myself but for my mother. Fortunately, I knew few people who could notice whether I was suffering or not. They might have mocked me if they had, which I could never have endured.

It was a much longer time until I strolled down Fleet Street again. Not until after I was married. And by then Temple Bar had gone, which made a big difference. And manners and customs had changed. Sometimes for the better. Sometimes not. Only on the surface, I daresay, in either case.

I still sometimes break into a sweat when I think of it all. I don't commonly eat meat pies, either. And for a long time I had to cut my own hair, until my wife took over. Since she passed on, I've not bothered with it, as you can see. Why disfigure God's image? as the Russians used to put it. He'll disfigure you fast enough on his own. You can count on that.

***

The old man was beginning to drool, as, according to him, the woman had done, so that I shut my newly acquired pad and bound it with the still

unstretched elastic.

If it had not been in a pub that I had met the old man, where then? I had met him in the auditorium of the Elephant, to which I had been sent as a dramatic critic. That too is properly an old man's job, but, in case of need, the smaller papers had, and still have, a habit of sending the youngest person available. I had also to cover boxing matches, swimming matches, dance contests, the running at Herne Hill, and often political and evangelical meetings. Never football matches at one end, or weddings at the other, both of which involved specialists.

The programme for that evening is before me now. I kept it with my notes of the old man's tale, and I have just found the packet, one of hundreds like it.

"Order Tea from the Attendants, who will bring it to you in the Interval. A Cup of Tea and A Plate of Bread and Butter, Price 3d. Also French Pastries, 3d. each."

Wilfrid Lawson, later eminent, played the clean-limbed, overinvolved young hero, Mark Ingestre, in the production we had seen.

There had been a live orchestra, whose opening number had been "Blaze Away."

There were jokes, there were adverts ("Best English Meat Only"), there were even Answers for Correspondents. The price of the programme is printed on the cover: Twopence.

On the other hand, there was a Do You Know? section. "Do You Know," ran the first interrogation, "that Sweeney Todd has broken all records for this theatre since it was built?"

***

Making him wear a three-cornered hat!" the old man had exclaimed with derision. "And Mrs. Lovat with her hair powdered!"

"David Garrick used to play Macbeth in knee breeches," I replied. Dramatic critics may often, as in my case, know little, but they all know that.

Biography Of Robert Aickman by Ron Breznay

Robert Aickman was an English writer best known for his "strange stories," as he termed them, which were subtle and poetic and concentrated more on the emotions of horror rather than material terror. He also wrote longer fiction as well as non-fiction and was an editor and conservationist.

Robert Fordyce Aickman was born in London on June 27, 1914. His father, William, was "the oddest man I have ever known." William had married at age 53 to a woman 30 years his junior and, being deeply set in his bachelor ways and accustomed to living alone, could not adapt to married life. This resulted in a family environment that was chaotic and emotionally empty, with the parents constantly bickering. Aickman's rancorous home life is mirrored in his stories *"The Clock Watcher," "Ringing the Changes," "The Stains," "The Fetch,"* and others. When Aickman was a teen-ager, his mother deserted the family. His father also eventually left, living Aickman living at home alone.

Aickman was originally schooled in architecture, which was his father's profession. However, his interests were more in the arts. Apparently, writing was in his blood as his maternal grandfather, Richard Marsh, was a prolific Victorian novelist, who wrote *The Beetle* (1897), an occult novel that was almost as popular as *Dracula* in its time. Aickman's mother encouraged him to write. He stated, "My mother aimed from the start to make me an author." He started reading the classics early and began writing while in school.

His first publication was the collection *We Are For The Dark: Six Ghost Stories* (1951), which contains three of his stories and three he wrote in collaboration with Elizabeth Jane Howard.

Critics have compared his work to that of Walter de la Mere and M.R. James. Peter Straub writes in his introduction to *The Wine-Dark Sea*: "What

attracted Aickman to ghosts was not the notion of dripping revenants but the feeling – composed in part of mystery, fear, stifled eroticism, hopelessness, nostalgia and the almost violent freedom granted by a suspension of rational rules – which they evoked in him."

The protagonist in *"The Visiting Star"* (1966) is an author who spends a winter in a desolate English town while researching a book on the mining industry. A famous actress shows up to star in a play at a local theater. The actress has a split personality – literally – with a mysterious character accompanying her embodying that personality.

"*The Inner Room*" (1966) tells of Lene, who visits an old shop and buys an odd doll house, the windows of which are shut fast, except for one from which a doll is partially protruding. When Lene gets the doll house home, she finds all the windows are tightly closed, and the doll is nowhere to be seen. She cannot remove the roof or any of the walls, and the only access she has to the inside of the doll house is the front door. Her exploration of the interior reveals many strange and unsettling sights. During a thunderstorm, she has a dream of the doll house and awakens to hear unfamiliar footsteps and then to see life-size dolls skulking about in the darkness. Nevertheless, she keeps the doll house, which affects her strangely for the rest of her life.

In "*The Hospice*" (1975), a traveling businessman loses his way in a maze of rural roads and ends up at a mysterious inn, where he has a series of strange encounters. The protagonist in *"Into the Wood"* (1968) has a similar strange stay at a hotel in the Swiss Alps, but unlike the businessman, is changed by the experience.

"The Next Glade" (1983) is about a strange hidden glade in a small wooded area in which a woman, Noelle, loses a friend, John, while strolling with him. Months later, while walking there with her husband, Melvin, she finds John standing next to a small house and digging a garden trench. Melvin is mortally wounded by a knife he is using to clear the path. At the funeral, John appears and takes Noelle for a walk in the woods. When they reach the glade, the small house and trench are gone, replaced by a huge pit in which hundreds or thousands of men are working–or is it just a vision? John again

disappears. This story reflects Aickman's preference of nature over industrial progress.

Aickman's short stories – he published a total of 48 – have been gathered into eight original collections and four reprint collections. Besides *We Are For The Dark*, the other original collections are: *Dark Entries: Curious and Macabre Ghost Stories* (1964); *Powers of Darkness: Macabre Stories* (1966); *Sub Rosa: Strange Tales* (1968); *Cold Hand in Mine: Eight Strange Stories* (1975); *Tales of Love and Death* (1977); *Intrusions: Strange Tales* (1980); and *Night Voices: Strange Stories* (1985). The reprint collections are *Painted Devils: Strange Stories*, which contains revised stories (1979); T*he Wine-Dark Sea* (1988); *The Unsettled Dust* (1990); and *The Collected Strange Stories*, two volumes containing all of his published stories (1999).

"The Fully-Conducted Tour", a previously unpublished story, appeared in the Autumn 2005 issue (Issue 5) of Wormwood.

Besides short stories, Aickman wrote three novels: *The Late Breakfasters* (1964), about lesbian love, ghosts, and the reviled inhabitants of a mysterious mansion; *The Model: A Novel of the Fantastic* (1987), a fairy tale set in pre-revolutionary Russia; and *Go Back at Once* (unpublished).

On the non-fiction side, Aickman wrote *The Story of Our Inland Waterways* (1955) and two autobiographies, *The Attempted Rescue* (1966 and reprinted by Tartarus Press in 2001), which relates his early years, and *The River Runs Uphill: A Story of Success and Failure* (1986), about his involvement with the Inland Waterways Association. He was also a theater critic for *The Nineteenth Century and After*, but his reviews have not yet been collected in book form.

Aickman edited eight volumes of the *Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories*, from 1964 through 1972. He included a story of his in six of these anthologies, and he wrote introductions for all but one.

Some of his writing remains unpublished. Among these works are three plays, *Allowance for Error, Duty,* and *The Golden Round; Panacea*, a philosophical work, which runs to over a thousand pages in manuscript; and *Go Back at Once*. The manuscripts of these works are among the papers

preserved in the Robert Aickman Collection at Bowling Green State University in Ohio.

A few of Aickman's works were adapted for other media. In 1968, *"Ringing the Changes"* appeared as *"The Bells of Hell"* on the BBC2 television program Late Night Horror. The same story was adapted for the CBC Radio drama series Nightfall on Halloween in 1980 and for BBC Radio Four on Halloween in 2000. *"The Swords"* was filmed in 1997 for the television horror series The Hunger. *"The Same Dog"* premiered as a musical play in 2000. *"The Cicerones"* was made into a short film in 2002 (which can be viewed at: The Cicerones).

As a conservationist, Aickman was best known as one of the co-founders of the Inland Waterways Association, whose aim was to restore and preserve England's canal system. Another co-founder, L.T.C. Rolt, was also a writer of weird fiction.

Aickman won the 1975 World Fantasy Award in short fiction for his vampire story *"Pages from a Young Girl's Journal"* and the 1981 British Fantasy Award for his story *"The Stains."* The Collected Strange Stories won the 2000 British Fantasy Award for best collection.

Aickman developed cancer and refused conventional medical treatment. He died on February 26, 1981.

Ron Breznay

Introduction To The Wine-Dark Sea by Peter Straub

Aickman at his best was this century's most profound writer of what we call horror stories and he, with greater accuracy, preferred to call strange stories. In his work is a vast disparity between the well-mannered tone and the stories' actual emotional content. On the surface of things, if we can extrapolate from the style, diction, and range of allusion in his work, Aickman was a cultivated, sensitive, thoroughly English individual. It's not hard to imagine him as having been something like T. S. Eliot: dry of manner, more kindly than not, High Anglican in dress, capable of surprising finesses of wit. His chief influences were English, the stories of Walter De La Mare and M. R. James (and probably also the subtle, often indirect supernatural stories of Henry James, England's most assimilated American), and his own influence has been primarily on English writers like Ramsey Campbell and, through Campbell, Clive Barker. (I think Aickman would have cherished Barker's story 'In the Hills, the Cities.') In fact, neither Campbell nor Barker is really very much like Aickman. His originality, conscious and instinctive at once, was so entire that although he has provided us with a virtual model of what the 'strange story' should be, if anyone tried to write to its specifications, the result would be nothing more than imitative.

Unlike nearly everybody writing supernatural stories now, Aickman rejected the neat, conclusive ending. He was, you might say, Stephen King's opposite. In his work there are no climactic showdowns, in part because his work uses almost none of the conventional imagery of horror. Aickman was sublimely uninterested in monsters, werewolves, worms, rats, bats, and things in bandages. (He did, however, write one great vampire story.) Absent from this list of horror conventions is ghosts, because Aickman *was* interested in ghosts, at least in a way – in the atmosphere a ghost creates, the thrill of unreality which surrounds it. Aickman was a queerly visionary writer, and ghosts, which are both utterly irrational and thoroughly English, would have appealed to him. In this collection a ghost might very well be

making telephone calls in 'Your Tiny Hand Is Frozen,' and a *kind* of ghost, the 'old carlie,' plays a crucial role in 'The Fetch', one of the most explicit and straightforward pieces here. You could stretch a point – stretch it past breaking – and say that 'Never Visit Venice' concerns an encounter with a ghost. It does not, of course. What attracted Aickman to ghosts was not the notion of dripping revenants but the feeling – composed in part of mystery, fear, stifled eroticism, hopelessness, nostalgia, and the almost violent freedom granted by a suspension of rational rules – which they evoked in him. Ghosts – or the complex of feelings I've just tried to summarise – gave him a degree of artistic freedom granted to only a very few writers.

We are in the age of *Dawn of the Dead* and *Friday the Thirteenth,* and to describe a writer of supernatural stories as cultivated and sensitive is nearly to condemn him. I had better explain what I mean by those terms and describe what I see as their consequences. Aickman's general learning gave him a wide referential range: these stories often allude to the worlds of opera, art, and literature, and if you really know nothing at all about Mozart or Wagner or Homer, you will have to pay even more attention than usual while reading some of these stories. Aickman's 'cultivation', which to me feels like that of an autodidact, enabled him to draw more kinds of experience, more nuance and shading, into his work; and his sensitivity meant that he felt things very deeply, everyday life as well as great art. Very good horror writers often demonstrate that ordinary life can be horrific and tedious at once for the sensitive person, and one suspects it was so for Aickman. It is a great mistake to read the life of the writing for that of the writer, but these stories leave little doubt that for Aickman's sensibility the contemporary world was a raucous, clanging din growing ever emptier of any real content. He frequently tells us that he abhors man in the mass and the pleasures of the vulgar crowd, what in the wonderfully titled 'Never Visit Venice' he calls 'the world's new littleness'. Experience was being flattened out all around him, being rendered coarser, simpler, and more accessible, and this process clearly made Aickman as 'sick at heart' as it does his protagonist, Henry Fern.

This response is not merely snobbish. There is too much sadness in it for that; and beneath the educated sadness, too much fear; and beneath the fear, too much respect for the great common human inheritance.

In nearly all of the stories collected here, the world of ordinary experience is as porous and malleable as a dream. 'Growing Boys' is a deadpan bit of uncharacteristic black humour in which the irrational and grotesque are hauled right into the immediate foreground of the story. (The only other story here as explicit as that, apart from 'The Fetch' and its family spectre, is 'The Wine-Dark Sea', a forthright allegory: as in a myth, man is blindly destructive to the original sacred world of the gods, and even Aickman's typically responsive and insightful lone traveller must be returned to the noisy, empty world he came from.) In every other story, the immediate result of a finely tuned sensibility finding danger and uncertainty everywhere in ordinary life is to make meaningless the concept of the 'ordinary'. Aickman's characters find themselves trapped in a series of events unconnected by logic, or which are connected by a nonlinear logic. Very often neither the characters nor the reader can be certain about *exactly* what has happened, yet the story has the satisfying rightness of a poem – a John Ashbery poem. Every detail is echoed or commented upon, nothing is random or wasted. The reader has followed the characters into a world which is remorseless, vast, and inexorable in its operations.

Unconscious forces drive these characters, and Aickman's genius was in finding imaginative ways for the unconscious to manipulate both the narrative events of his tales and the structures in which they occur. Because there are no logical explanations, there can be no resolutions. After the shock of the sheer strangeness fades away, we begin to see how the facts of the stories appear to grow out of the protagonists' fears and desires, and how the illogic and terror surrounding them is their own, far more accurately and disturbingly than in any conventional horror story. 'The Trains' is a perfect story of this type, and 'The Inner Room' is even better, one of Aickman's most startling and beautiful demonstrations of the power over us of what we do not quite grasp about ourselves and our lives.

As wonderful as those stories are, 'Into the Wood' seems to me the masterpiece of the collection. In it all of Aickman's themes come together in an act of self-acceptance which is at once dangerous, enigmatic, in narrative terms wholly justified, and filled with the reverence for the imaginative power demonstrated by Aickman's work in general.

On the narrative surface 'Into the Wood' is about insomnia. Margaret, the wife of an English road builder, inadvertently comes upon a sanatorium set in a Swedish forest. After she has arranged to stay there for several days, she discovers that the sanatorium, or the Kurhus, is a refuge for those who never sleep: the rest of the world, the 'sleepers,' cannot tolerate their presence. True insomniacs 'have to live with reality twenty-four hours a day,' she is told, and their knowledge makes them feared. During the day they rest, aloof even from one another, and at night they walk in the woods around the sanatorium. Margaret's dissatisfaction with the empty social round she must endure as her husband's wife and her uneasiness at finding herself stranded amidst these silent and peculiar people are delineated subtly and economically. Aickman tells us that until her experience at the Kurhus, Margaret would have rejected the idea that she was unhappy, being 'insufficiently grown for unhappiness or happiness.' Swedish hospitality has exhausted her, but the Kurhus is like the Alice books in its reversal of ordinary rules and customs. Two orders of being are opposed here, and when Margaret enters the woods, she realises for the first time that her true self, the Margaret of her inner life, requires more spiritual and imaginative freedom than life with her husband provides. She senses that she has begun to find a way of being 'beyond logic, beyond words, above all beyond connection with... normal life.' She has found within herself a capacity for seeing what is real. That evening a sympathetic Kurhus resident tells her that 'only by great sacrifices can we poor human beings reach great truths.' Margaret instinctively knows what he means. Some few insomniacs, he says, walk into the great Swedish forest beyond the wood and never return: they have reached their limits and found their deepest truth.

From this point the story moves like a series of tapestries as it enacts the consequences of Margaret's strange encounter with her own being. In a sense, 'Into the Wood' is an extended metaphor for the separation, even estrangement, between the artist and the conventional world, and the artist's sense of an inner glory and necessity which can be shirked only at the expense of his true relationship to himself; or so I thought when I first read it, and was immediately grateful to have read it. But abstract reflections on 'the artist' are seldom satisfactory, and are never as satisfactory, nor as moving, as this story. We could say, far more pertinently, that if stories are ever about anything but the particular ways they are themselves and no

other story, 'Into the Wood' is about being a dedicated, delicately organised man named Robert Aickman; about knowing there is a great wild forest within you; about understanding that you must go into that forest in search of your own limits; and doing so with the knowledge that many other people have felt that a world of unsentimental grandeur lies within and that to deny or ignore it is to choose an uneasy half-life. Aickman's originality was rooted in need – he had to write these stories, and that is why they are worth reading and rereading.

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